The

AMERICAN SCHOLAR

SPRING 2002 · $6.95 / $9.00 Canada

BROWN

Richard Rodriguez

THE MOURNING PAPER

Thomas Mallon

BEARING ARMS

Tim Morris

ACCENT

Barry Newman

THE TRAMP OF A FLY'S FOOTSTEP

John M. Picker

THE PALLBEARERS' KNEES

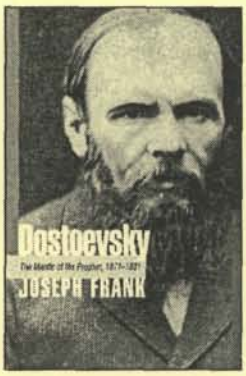
Frederick Busch

MY LIFE WITH A FIELD GUIDE

Diana Kappel-Smith

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

New from Princeton



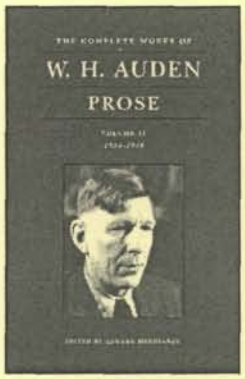
Dostoevsky

The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871–1881

Joseph Frank

This fifth and final volume of Joseph Frank's justly celebrated biography of Dostoevsky renders with a rare intelligence and grace the last decade of the writer's life, the years in which he wrote *A Raw Youth*, *Diary of a Writer*, and his crowning triumph: *The Brothers Karamazov.*

Cloth $35.00 0-691-08665-6 Due May



The Complete Works of W. H. Auden

Prose, Volume II, 1939–1948

W. H. Auden

Edited by Edward Mendelson

W. H. Auden's first ten years in the United States were marked by rapid and extensive change in his life and thought. This volume contains every piece of prose that Auden wrote during these years, including essays and reviews he published under pseudonyms. Most have never been reprinted in any form since their initial publication.

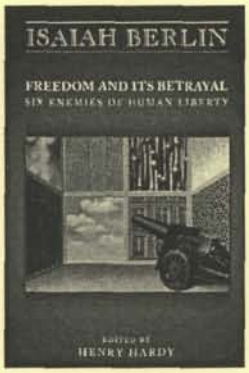
Cloth $39.50 ISBN 0-691-08935-3 Due May

Freedom and Its Betrayal

Six Enemies of Human Liberty

Isaiah Berlin

Edited by Henry Hardy



Isaiah Berlin's celebrated radio lectures on six formative anti-liberal thinkers were broadcast by the BBC in 1952. They are published here for the first time, fifty years later.

Cloth $24.95 ISBN 0-691-09099-8

New in paperback

The Power of Ideas

Isaiah Berlin

Edited by Henry Hardy

"[This] volume … covers the key areas of Berlin's interests in an unusually accessible way; it will take its place as, quite simply, the best short introduction to his thinking."
—Noel Malcolm, *Sunday Telegraph*

Paper $16.95 ISBN 0-691-09276-1

Princeton University Press

800-777-4726 • WWW.PUP.PRINCETON.EDU

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The

AMERICAN SCHOLAR

PUBLISHED
by
The PHI BETA KAPPA *Society*

SPRING 2002 VOL. 71, NO. 2

Life is our dictionary.
—RALPH WALDO EMERSON, "The American Scholar," 1837

Editorial Board

NICHOLSON BAKER
ALLISON BLAKELY
D. GRAHAM BURNETT
TODD GITLIN
ADAM GOODHEART
ALLEGRA GOODMAN
ANTHONY GRAFTON
MARGO JEFFERSON
DONALD S. LAMM
DAVID LEVERING LEWIS
MATTHEW MESELSON
CYNTHIA OZICK
ALEX SOOJUNG-KIM PANG
PHYLLIS ROSE
CATHARINE R. STIMPSON

Poetry Board

RITA DOVE
HEATHER McHUGH
PAUL MULDOON

ANNE FADIMAN, *Editor*
JOSEPH W. GORDON, *Consulting Editor*
JOHN T. BETHELL, *Senior Editor*
JEAN STIPICEVIC, *Managing Editor*
SANDRA COSTICH, *Associate Editor*
NATASHA WIMMER, *Literary Editor*
ROBERT FARNSWORTH, *Poetry Editor*
SAMANTHA REHERMAN, *Editorial Assistant*
NICHOLSON BAKER, ANDRÉ BERNARD,
FRANCINE DU PLESSIX GRAY, THOMAS MALLON,
SHERWIN B. NULAND, GARY SHAPIRO, *Contributing Editors*
WILLIAM WHITWORTH, *Editor-at-Large*

JOHN CHURCHILL, *Publisher*
EUGENIA T. HAYES, *Associate Publisher*
EDNA NWABUFO, *Subscription Manager*
LYNETTE EDWARDS, *Subscription Assistant*

THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR®, a quarterly journal of literature, science, and culture, has been published for a general readership since 1932 by the Phi Beta Kappa Society, 1785 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Fourth Floor, Washington, D.C. 20036. ISSN 0003-0937. Tel. 202-265-3808; fax 202-265-0083; e-mail scholar@pbk.org. To enter a subscription, call 800-821-4567. **Subscription rates:** for individuals, $25 one year, $48 two years, $69 three years; for institutions, $30 one year, $58 two years. For foreign subscriptions, including Canada, please add $3 a year for postage. Single copies, mailed on request, $8. Periodical postage paid at Washington, D.C., and at additional mailing offices. Copyright ©2002 by the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Printed in U.S.A. Postmaster: Send address changes to THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR, 1785 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Fourth Floor, Washington, D.C. 20036. Manuscript submissions should include a self-addressed stamped envelope; THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR assumes no responsibility for loss or damage. Opinions expressed in this magazine are not necessarily those of its editors, its Editorial Board, or the officers of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. U.S. newsstand distribution by International Periodical Distributors, 674 Via De La Valle, Suite 200, Solana Beach, CA 92075. **Advertising inquiries should be directed to EUGENIA T. HAYES, Box 1905, New Haven, CT 06509-1905; tel. 203-432-0652; fax 203-432-1192; e-mail ehayes@pbk.org.**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bookshelves

In 1974, in his first contribution to the SCHOLAR, Richard Rodriguez, who was then a graduate student in English Renaissance literature, wrote:

> A few months ago, my dissertation nearly complete, I came upon my father looking through my bookcase. He quietly fingered the volumes of Milton's tracts and Augustine's theology with that combination of reverence and distrust those who are not literate sometimes show for the written word. Silently, I watched him from the door of the room. However much he would have insisted that he was "proud" of his son for being able to master the texts, I knew, if pressed further, he would have admitted to complicated feelings about my success.

That essay, "Going Home Again," grew into *Hunger of Memory,* the first of a trilogy of memoirs that will be completed this spring with the publication of *Brown.* In the dazzling excerpt we chose as this issue's lead essay, Rodriguez has more to say about books. "How a society orders its bookshelves," he observes, "is as telling as the books a society writes and reads." During the 1950s, when he was growing up in California, de facto segregation was widespread, but Frederick Douglass and Alexis de Tocqueville could still keep company on a bookstore shelf. Today, on the other hand, "books are isolated from one another, like gardenias or peaches, lest they bruise or become bruised."

I asked Rodriguez recently how his ideal bookstore would be organized.

"Chaotically," he said. "What I love most are secondhand bookstores that are completely *dis*organized. I get published because there's a Hispanic shelf—I know that—but that means I'll always be shelved next to a sociological study of Mexican-Americans in Texas in the 1940s. I'll never be shelved next to the books that created me."

"What books created you?" I asked.

"The works of James Baldwin and D. H. Lawrence," he said. "When I was a teenager, my brownness gave me the freedom to identify with anyone I wanted." If he were growing up today, Rodriguez believes, he'd be given less leeway to venture out of his prescribed literary neighborhood.

"I hate borders," he added. "I don't think a gay Filipino should insist that only another gay Filipino can write about him. *I* want to feel free to write about Thackeray. That would be the great brown breakthrough. People should be allowed to become illegal immigrants in each other's lives."

A. F.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

· CONTENTS ·

AT LARGE AND AT SMALL ..... *Thomas Mallon* 5

COMMONPLACE BOOK ..... *collected by André Bernard* 10

ARTICLES

Brown ..... *Richard Rodriguez* 13
Bearing Arms ..... *Tim Morris* 33
Optilenz ..... *Caroline Heller* 53
Accent ..... *Barry Newman* 59
On Not Psychoanalyzing Virginia Woolf ..... *Peter Gay* 71
Neckties ..... *Daniel Harris* 79
The Tramp of a Fly's Footstep ..... *John M. Picker* 85
Grizzled Minstrels of Angst ..... *Todd Gitlin* 95
John Muir's Alaskan Rhapsody ..... *Edward Hoagland* 101
Inferno ..... *Susan Mahler* 107
The Pallbearers' Knees ..... *Frederick Busch* 115

THE UNCERTAIN ART ..... *Sherwin B. Nuland* 127

JOURNAL ..... *Leif Enger* 132

BOOKS

REREADING: My Life with a Field Guide ..... *Diana Kappel-Smith* 136

Homme, Hombre, Omul ..... *Jim Holt* 142

REVIEWS ..... *David Levering Lewis, Jennifer Schuessler, Tara Bahrampour* 145

POETRY

The Flood Gives a Millworker a Holiday ..... *Leland Kinsey* 30
Key West ..... *Fred D'Aguiar* 32
Delivering Eggs to the Girls' Dorm ..... *B. H. Fairchild* 49
Reading Balzac ..... *Margaret Ryan* 50
On Never Ending with a Preposition ..... *David Hamilton* 70
Prayer ..... *Edgar Koerner* 76
In the Gallery ..... *Patricia Hooper* 78
Seed ..... *Brian Swann* 106
A Lesson in Narrative Time ..... *Jody Bolz* 112

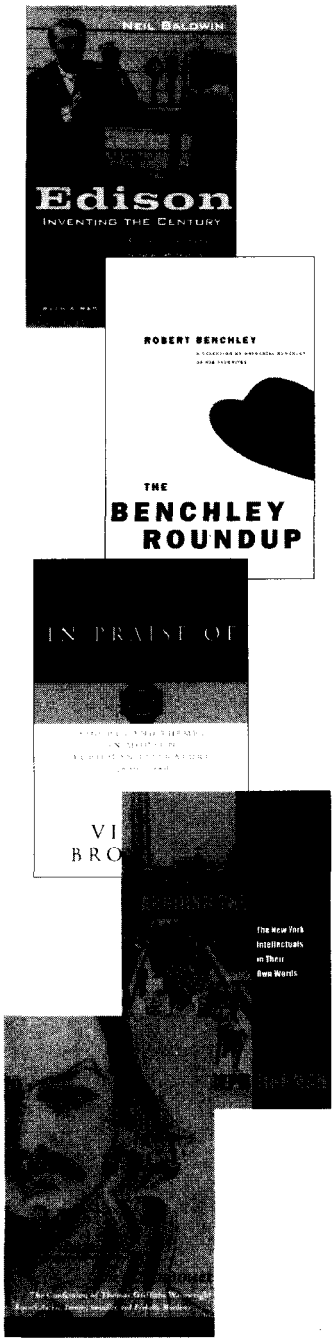
THE READER REPLIES 157

THE PODIUM ..... *Susan Sontag* 160

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Inventors, Poisoners, Jokers

New Paperbacks from Chicago



Edison
Inventing the Century
Neil Baldwin

"Baldwin has demythologized the man and left the genius bigger than life."—David Gates, *Newsweek*
Paper $18.00

The Benchley Roundup
A Selection by Nathaniel Benchley of his Favorites
Robert C. Benchley

"I was always looking for Benchley's stuff, and thought he was wonderful, and still think he was wonderful."—E. B. White
Paper $18.00

In Praise of Antiheroes
Figures and Themes in Modern European Literature, 1830–1980
Victor Brombert

"There is little 'theory' and much good sense. . . . [An] elegant study."—John Sutherland, *New York Times Book Review*
Paper $15.00

Arguing the World
The New York Intellectuals in their Own Words
Joseph Dorman

"Fascinating insights into what may have been the last generation of public intellectuals."—*Booklist*
Paper $16.00

Wainewright the Poisoner
The Confessions of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright
Andrew Motion

"Brilliantly innovative, gripping, intricately researched, Motion's biography does justice to its subject at last."—John Carey, *Sunday Times*
Paper $18.00

AVAILABLE IN BOOKSTORES.

The University of Chicago Press
www.press.uchicago.edu

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

AT LARGE AND AT SMALL

The Mourning Paper

THOMAS MALLON

For the past seventeen years, I have had an apartment in New York, just a few hundred yards from the United Nations. I spend a night or two each week there, and in the months after September 11, I required an alarm clock as I never had before. The noise of truck traffic always used to get me up, but it was gone after the Trade Center attacks. With the U.N. a possible terrorist target, my block was barricaded at either end by sand trucks, concrete dividers, and out-of-town policemen who had come to Manhattan to help out. The sudden silence on this cosmopolitan, international street was eerie and suburban: its residents were now living on a pedestrian mall.

Throughout the fall, I myself closed off a street, a personal one, down which I might have proceeded in response to this calamity. I decided not, except in my diary, to write anything about the attacks. When a couple of publications asked me to comment upon what the writer's role ought to be in such a time, I found myself saying that more writers might consider silence on this subject. That choice seemed to me more eloquent than some of the hasty, self-regarding pieces by cultural commentators and novelists that I was seeing in so many magazines. There were, of course, exceptions, but I found that I was keener to read the work of tabloid journalists—who at least did some reporting, retrieved information, told a story—than the abstract musings of literary mandarins upon a place (the Trade Center) and a population (the ordinary white-collar denizens of the financial world) that had rarely interested them before last September.

Like most New Yorkers, I had never been to the Trade Center except with out-of-town visitors who wanted to see the city from the observation deck on the 107th floor of the South Tower. Sure enough, in a long-ago volume of my diary, I can find the account of one such touristic ascent. Up on the deck, I noted, "acrophobia is completely done away with: one is so high up that one feels there would be plenty of time to pick and choose where one wanted to land should one fall." This visit occurred on June 8, 1977, during New York's period of bankruptcy, arson, and panic—the *Taxi Driver* era. The diary says that my friend and I took note of some burnt-out buildings—up in the South Bronx, I imagine—even though "taken as a whole" the city appeared "as neat as a Monopoly board." The current irony of this observation—our looking at a part of the city that would be largely rebuilt by the time the Trade Center was destroyed—is so surefire, so easy, that it can only be deemed cheap, unworthy of the event that finally produced it. And that is how most literary writing about September 11 struck me.

The city's publishing world, like most other components of New York, resumed its routine only gradually, and with a certain nervousness, as last fall wore on. The season of book parties always starts right after Labor Day, like the school year, but the first such gathering I remember going to after the attacks came on November 8. I was there at Elaine's, a decades-old venue for such affairs, because I'd written a short introduction to the book being celebrated: an anthology of obituaries by the *New*

Thomas Mallon writes the "At Large and At Small" column each spring. His most recent book is *Mrs. Paine's Garage and the Murder of John F. Kennedy.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

York Times's Robert McG. Thomas, a gentle master of the art who had himself died, at the age of sixty, the year before. Thomas's offbeat subjects—the inventor of Kitty Litter; the minister who had to conduct Lee Harvey Oswald's funeral; "Toots Barger," the legendary champion of duckpin bowling—had prompted me to call him "a lover of the far-fetched and the overlooked" and to quote an observation, from his *Times* colleague Michael T. Kaufman, that Thomas had "singlehandedly humanized the paper."

Kaufman's remark came back to me when someone at the party observed that without Thomas's lasting influence we might not now be experiencing the *Times*'s "Portraits of Grief"—those two-hundred-word thumbnail tributes to victims of the World Trade Center attacks that were now filling a full page of the paper every day. These Portraits were, it is not an exaggeration to say, the talk of the city, as much a conversation staple—and as much a matter of pride—as the city's transformed mayor. So when someone pronounced Thomas their guiding spirit, I nodded and concealed the fact that, even though I read some of the Portraits every day, scanning the small pictures and the names, dreading the moment when I'd learn that some long-ago classmate or student had perished, I actually disliked these vignettes, and disliked them more all the time.

I seem more or less alone in this judgment. The Portraits of Grief project has been profiled and praised in *Vanity Fair*; on PBS's *News Hour*, on C-Span, and in *The New Yorker*, where Mark Singer gently pointed out that the rubric "seemed a misnomer. Wasn't what made these stories so engrossing, individually and collectively, the textured and concise way in which they captured lives before grief set in?" In fact, the title was accurate: these squibs were, in the end, less about their ostensible subjects than about the people reading them. But insofar as they had to do with grief, it was a feel-good, aren't-I-sensitive grief: manageably poignant, and no doubt useful in reaching "closure," as we like to say in America, without much idea of what the word means, if it means anything at all.

"A number of *New York Times* metro editors were sitting around a few days after the disaster, trying to figure out how we could memorialize this extraordinary event," reporter Jan Hoffman told C-Span's Brian Lamb last November. This was "not traditional journalism," she explained. When Hoffman interviewed friends and family of the dead, she told them that the paper would only be "reflecting what you tell me . . . we are really mirrors." By late November at least thirty people had contributed squibs; Hoffman described an enthusiastic "newsroom-wide effort to say yes" to the project.

The Portraits of Grief operated according to their own quickly developed set of tropes, substituting, in most cases, treacle for essence. Day after day, a dozen personalities were obliterated with the Grief team's pastels. To read the Portraits, one would believe that work counted for next to nothing, that every hard-charging bond trader and daredevil fireman preferred—and managed—to spend more time with his family than at the office. "'He always returned to family. That was his No. 1 interest.'" "'He often said he would rather be with his family than anybody else.'" "He spent all of his free time on his wife." The refrain is so endless, a reader can only conclude that the "kinder, gentler nation" once called for by the first President Bush has actually been here all along. It's the same with baseball; one would think from the widespread, intense fandom invoked by the Portraits that the national pastime is in the same tip-top shape as the American family.

In the days after September 11, I realized that I loved New York City enough to die, or kill, for it. But I do not recognize the city I have lived in or next to, almost all my life, on the Portraits of Grief page. The *Times* has repopulated Ground Zero with the citizens of Pleasantville, and the "newspaper of record" has been patting itself on the back for constructing the world's largest sympathy card.

The thousands of people who worked in the Twin Towers toted with them, every day, along with their share of blessings, their share of bad marriages, maxed-out credit cards, and Type-A heartbreak. They were people, not the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

smile-button cyborgs of the *Times*, where anyone depressed over his weight became a "gentle giant" and every binge drinker was the life of the party. A surprising number of the dead have been infantilized, with much of the *Times*'s two-hundred-word allotment going to Disney World trips or toy animals: "Mrs. Ehrlich had a soft spot for useless frog paraphernalia. 'As long as the frog wasn't too cartoonlike,' her husband said."

As the Portraits accumulated over weeks and months, I began performing mental translations, from a sugary base 8 to a real-life base 10. The fifty-four-year-old vegetarian office temp, a bachelor with "strong opinions" who preferred "short-term jobs," was, I would bet, an absolutely impossible man; but I would prefer to have known him rather than the bland reincarnation forced to share a page with other murdered souls under headings like "The Joys of Fatherhood" and "Perpetual Motion." These titles, set in larger type than the victims' names, are relentlessly sentimental and soporific: "Prankster With a Heart," "Modest Winner," "Instiller of Love," "Faithful to Family," "Touching Everyone," "Many Best Friends," "Mr. Generosity." At a certain point I wanted to parody them, but the editors had pretty much done that job themselves: "Multilingual and Multinice."

If Rudolph W. Giuliani had perished in the attacks, as he nearly did, he would be remembered in the Portraits as a rabid Yankees fan who sometimes liked to put on lipstick.

I can't help feeling that this enterprise became, in the end, as much about winning a Pulitzer Prize as it was about anything else. In an article bidding farewell to the Portraits as a regular feature, the *Times* noted that reading them had become a daily "ritual for people nationwide"—making one think of those gauzy, upscale TV commercials touting home subscription to the Sunday paper: "She goes straight for 'Arts and Leisure.' I check out the Magazine." The *Times* was sure it had succeeded in bringing the Trade Center victims to life, citing plenty of support for that view from readers—and writers. The novelist Paul Auster declared: "One felt, looking at those pages every day, that real lives were jumping out at you. We weren't mourning an anonymous mass of people, we were mourning thousands of individuals." Jan Hoffman told C-Span that the *Times* wanted to show how "every victim mattered . . . that they were not numbers." And yet the emphasis was always on numbers—how the *Times* had the resources and the space to memorialize every victim whose family would cooperate. (About 20 percent of those contacted declined.) New Yorkers speculated on how long the project would continue, the way they might guess an HBO series' chances of renewal.

For all the intention to individualize the victims, the result was homogenization. It could not have been otherwise, given the emotional agenda of those who wrote the Portraits and those who consumed them. Preparing them, said Hoffman, provided "an experience of falling in love and then having your heart broken every single time." A caller to C-Span said the vignettes showed how "ordinary life is a matter of being heroic." If either Hoffman or the caller is right, I fail to see why either love or heroism is a condition sufficiently special to require a name. In fact, love would be worth nothing if most people didn't inspire our indifference; heroism would be cheap indeed if you needed it to cross the street.

And yet the Portraits impelled their readers, time and again, to express their extravagant admiration. Three months after infuriating many *New Yorker* readers with a short piece that conceded the "courage" of the September 11 suicide pilots and deplored the way politics had been "replaced by psychotherapy," Susan Sontag was back to tell the *Times*: "I read the 'Portraits of Grief,' every last word, every single day. I was tremendously moved. I had tears in my eyes every morning." Hoffman revealed that the squibs had even become talismanic to some frightened New York commuters: "I've spoken to a number of people who say that part of their morning ritual, as they approach a bridge or a tunnel, is [to] pull up the page of the 'Portraits,' and . . . read them as a way of sort of protecting themselves."

Less mystically, one caller to C-Span complimented Hoffman on the series' "beautiful,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sensitive" writing. I wonder if that would include: "The lost echoes of her full-throated laughter. The memory of her smile across the dinner table. Her postcards mailed from distant countries. That is all that remains of Ms. Chalasani." Hoffman would point out that, as "mirrors" of the survivors being interviewed, the reporters are mostly reflecting language other than their own. But the *Times*'s attempts at indirect free style ("Oh boy, would he"; "let's not even talk about the memorabilia") are often so tone-deaf as to remind one of how badly the paper relates to the outer-borough world from which so many of the victims commuted, and of why a large number of the Portraits' subjects were, one is pretty sure, more regular readers of the *Post* and *Daily News*.

The connection that some *Times* readers are making between the "Portraits of Grief" and the spirit of Robert McG. Thomas is, I believe, a false one. Thomas generally wrote about lives that had reached some sort of quirky fulfillment: "Hal Lipset, a storied San Francisco sleuth who helped elevate, or rather reduce, electronic surveillance to a miniature art, died on Monday at a San Francisco hospital. He was 78 and was best known as the man who put a bug in a martini olive." Thomas was, in fact, not good at dealing with violence, certainly not the kind that incinerated lives in the space of a terrifying hour.

The *Times*'s desire to individualize the Trade Center victims is part of a new national desire to remember those lost in any large catastrophe as unique people instead of aggregate carnage. The panels of the AIDS quilt; the names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington; the 168 "chairs" for those who perished in the Oklahoma City bombing: these memorials all result from an understandable impulse toward the singular. And yet they make one ask whether the calamities that were their first cause—disease, war, and terrorism—won't become, for future beholders of these monuments, a kind of blurred and blended Death, Inc. Should we not somehow, in creating these memorials, ponder the scourge as much as the victims?

I don't know the answer to this, but I do know that I line up with Mayor Bloomberg, and not with former Mayor Giuliani, when it comes to the question of what monument should be erected at Ground Zero to the victims of September 11, 2001. The new mayor wants any memorial to be incorporated within a rebuilt commercial environment that emphasizes business over commemoration; Mr. Giuliani would—wrongly, I think—devote the whole site to a tribute. It is Mayor Bloomberg who is being true to the spirit of New York, which has always been about moving onward and—literally—upward. In their new book, *Unearthing Gotham: The Archaeology of New York City*, Anne-Marie Cantwell and Diana di Zerega Wall point out that "unlike the nation's other early cities or many of the well-known Old World cities that exude a cherished past, New York rarely uses its history in constructing its identity." The authors note, for example, that the long-buried remains of an early-seventeenth-century Dutch merchant ship, the *Tijger*, may have been destroyed during the 1960s as construction proceeded on the World Trade Center.

My midtown street is once again open for business and life. Within five years, if the city is true to form, Ground Zero will be a neighborhood name, a real-estate designation as familiar as Tribeca. The three thousand New Yorkers who died there will live on not in the microfilmed sentiments of the *New York Times* but beneath the feet—ambitious, sore, and human—of other, newer New Yorkers—profane, imperfect, and real—who are rushing over their ashes, filling the buildings, jamming the elevators, going to work.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Salmagundi

Subscribe Now !!

Winter 2002: A Symposium

"Afro-America At The Present Time"

Orlando Patterson
Darryl Pinckney
Benjamin Barber • Hazel Carby
Jill Nelson • Eugene Rivers
James Miller
Kendall Thomas
George Fredrickson
Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn

• • •

In Future Issues
Arthur Danto, Susan Sontag
Michael Fried, Philip Fisher
Is This An Age of the Museum?

and

George Steiner • *The Fate of the Muses*
Richard Howard • *A Long Poem*
Christopher Hitchens • *War Crimes*
Regina Janes • *Femicons*
Seamus Heaney • *An Interview*
Marilynne Robinson • *Positionings*

To subscribe to *Salmagundi*, enclose $30. for two years (8 issues), $60. for five years (20 issues). Visa or MasterCard orders must include card number and expiration date. Foreign subscriptions please add $10. per sub. year for postage. Institutions: apply for rates.

Mail orders to:
Salmagundi / Skidmore College
Saratoga Springs, NY 12866
e-mail orders to : pboyers@skidmore.edu

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I dined at the Chaplain's table upon a roasted Tongue and Udder. N.B. I shall not dine on a roasted Tongue and Udder again soon.

– REV. JAMES WOODFORDE,
The Diary of a Country Parson, 1758-1802
February 17, 1763

When they have taken their seats in silence, the baker serves out the loaves to them in order, and the cook sets before each one a plate with a single course. Before meat the priest says a grace, and none may partake until after the prayer. When breakfast is ended, he pronounces a further grace; thus at the beginning and at the close they do homage to God as a bountiful giver of life.

– JOSEPHUS
(*Circa* A.D. 37–100),
The Jewish War, Book II

COMMONPLACE BOOK

Dining

COLLECTED BY
ANDRÉ BERNARD

My friend at the estate invited us to a late breakfast after having shown me what I came to see. "You have taken me so unawares," said he, "that we cannot offer you much except a welcome." Well, it was not much—for Cuba perhaps. A delicious soup, made partly of eggs, a bottle of excellent claret, a paté de foie gras, some game deliciously dressed, and half a dozen kinds of vegetables; that was all. I had seen nothing among the slaves which in any way interfered with my appetite, or with the cup of coffee and cigar which came after the little nothings above mentioned.

– ANTHONY TROLLOPE,
The West Indies and the Spanish Main, *1859*

Lunched at the Golden Egg. Oh, the horror—the cold stuffiness, claustrophobic place of tables, garish lights and mass produced food in steel dishes. And the egg-shaped menu!

– BARBARA PYM,
A Very Private Eye:
An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters
November 27, 1964

When at table, he was totally absorbed in the business of the moment; his looks seemed riveted to his plate; nor would he, unless when in very lively company, say one word, or even pay the least attention to what was said by others, till he had satisfied his appetite: which was so fierce, and indulged with such intenseness, that while in the act of eating, the veins of his forehead swelled, and generally a strong perspiration was visible. To those whose sensations were delicate, this could not but be disgusting; and it was doubtless not very suitable to the character of a philosopher, who should be distinguished by self-command. [Johnson], though he could be rigidly *abstemious,* was not a *temperate* man in eating or drinking. He could refrain, but he could not use moderately.

– JAMES BOSWELL,
Life of Samuel Johnson, *1791*

He was a light eater . . . and as a rule ate plain food. He particularly liked coarse bread, small fish, handmade moist cheese, and twice-bearing green figs; and he would eat even before dinner, wherever and whenever he felt hungry. I quote word for word from some of his letters: "I ate a little bread and some dates in my carriage." And again: "As I was on my homeward way from the Regia in my litter, I devoured an ounce of bread and a few grapes from a cluster of firm-skinned table grapes."

– SUETONIUS (*b. circa* A.D. 69)
on the deified Caesar Augustus,
in Lives of the Caesars, LXXVI

It is often said that you need a solid stomach to live on Burgundian cooking; but Burgundian cooking develops solid stomachs. You can dig your grave with your teeth much more quickly on the rich elaborate cooking of the *haute cuisine* than on the sturdy more natural cooking of Burgundy.

– WAVERLY ROOT,
The Food of France, *1958*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In the reign of Emperor Ichijo a type of butter (*so*) was made of cow's milk, but it did not become popular and soon disappeared from the Japanese diet—so completely, indeed, that when the first Westerners arrived in the country their outstanding characteristic, apart from having red hair and bulging blue eyes, was that they were "butter-stinking" (*bata-kusai*).

– IVAN MORRIS,
The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan, *1964*

From the Ocean Sea . . . come daily supplies of fish in great quantity, brought 25 miles up the river, and there is also great store of fish from the lake, which is the constant resort of fishermen, who have no other business. Their fish is of sundry kinds, changing with the season; and, owing to the impurities of the city which pass into the lake, it is remarkably fat and savory.

– MARCO POLO (1254–1324),
Travels of Marco Polo

Dined versus six o' the clock. Forgot that there was a plum-pudding, (I have added, lately, *eating* to my "family of vices,") and had dined before I knew it. Drank half a bottle of what they call brandy, rum, &c, &c, here is nothing but spirits of wine, coloured accordingly. Did *not* eat two apples which were placed by way of dessert.

– GEORGE GORDON, LORD BYRON,
Journals, *January 5, 1821*

Every Tuesday for dinner we have skua, half a bird to a man, enough for a meal and very good indeed. One day in the week we have stuffed seal's heart, another seal steak and kidney pie, another seal steak and onions, and so on. For breakfast we have the best dish of all—seal's liver, twice a week, other days stewed seal meat or curried. Thursday is . . . "Scurvy Day," being the only day in the week on which we have tinned meat. No one likes it so much as the seal, but it gives a day off to the cooks, who otherwise never get a holiday.

– EDWARD WILSON,
Diary of the *Discovery* Expedition to the Antarctic Regions 1901–04, *September 1, 1903*

In the heroic age before the First World War, there were men and women who ate, in addition to a whacking lunch and a glorious dinner, a voluminous *souper* after the theater or the other amusements of the evening. I have known some of the survivors, octogenarians of unblemished appetite and unfailing good humor—spry, wry, and free of the ulcers that come from worrying about a balanced diet—but they have had no emulators in France since the doctors there discovered the existence of the human liver.

– A. J. LIEBLING,
Between Meals: An Appetite for Paris, *1959*

I noticed a very funny note in the kitchen from old Kate who "does" for my mother. "Madam," it said, "had one [bomb] at the top of the street. I was shot out of my bed. It was gastley, all night digging. Today I am nearly a cripple, I can hardly walk. I think it must be rumatism. I am breaking up. The butcher has run out of sausages." My mother's note for today simply said, "Dear Kate, so glad you are still alive. I think we will have Welsh Rarebit tonight."

– JOAN WYNDHAM,
Love Lessons: A Wartime Diary, *July 6, 1943*

When I was little, children were bought two kinds of ice cream, sold from those white wagons with canopies made of silvery metal: either the two-cent cone or the four-cent ice-cream pie. The two-cent cone was very small, in fact it could fit comfortably into a child's hand. . . . Granny always suggested I eat only a part of the cone, then throw away the pointed end, because it had been touched by the vendor's hand (though that was the best part, nice and crunchy, and it was regularly eaten in secret, after a pretense of discarding it).

– UMBERTO ECO,
"How to Eat Ice Cream," *1988*

I have been unwell all the morning. Nota bene, never eat *new* honey. Lay in bed nearly all day, in consequence of that nota bene not having been noted yesterday.

– ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING,
Diary, *September 6, 1831*

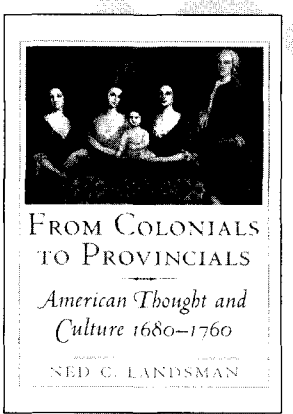
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Age of Contradiction

American Thought and Culture in the 1960s

HOWARD BRICK

"What Brick has done is to remind us of just how important ideas were in the 1960s and, equally important, to illustrate how these various threads of 1960s life—the political, the social, and the intellectual—all wound in and out of one another."—*The Journal of American History.* 15 illustrations. $16.95 paper



From Colonials to Provincials

American Thought and Culture 1680–1760

NED C. LANDSMAN

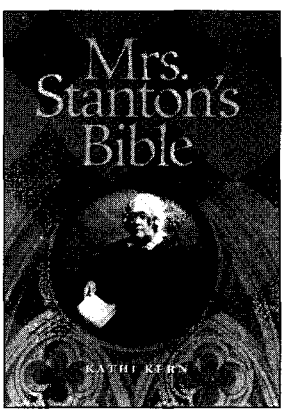
"A succinct . . . account of the development of colonial North American thought and culture from 1680 to the eve of the American Revolution. Not an anachronistic search for the origins of later American cultural forms, it situates the subject firmly within a transatlantic context."—*The Journal of American History.* 8 illustrations. $16.95 paper

The Victorian Homefront

American Thought and Culture 1860–1880

LOUISE L. STEVENSON

"Louise L. Stevenson persuasively argues that Victorian culture was shaped as much by those who lived in the Civil War and Reconstruction period—the receivers of ideas—as by the shapers. . . . [A] pioneering [book] that combines the best of intellectual history and material culture."—*The Historian.* 19 illustrations. $16.95 paper

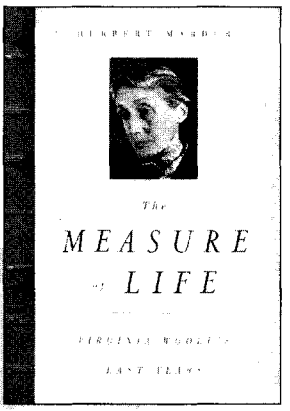


Mrs. Stanton's Bible

KATHI KERN

A *Choice* Outstanding Academic Title, 2001

"Through responsible research and a fresh, original perspective, Kathi Kern provides us access to a substantial feminist critique of Christianity by a towering nineteenth-century intellectual."—Ann Braude, Harvard Divinity School. 13 illustrations. $39.95



New in Paper—

The Measure of Life

Virginia Woolf's Last Years

HERBERT MARDER

Outstanding runner-up, biography, Society of Midland Authors

"In Marder's sensitive account, Woolf's suicide is not the unexplainable tragedy of madness, but rather the measured end of a narrative, as inevitable as it is unhappy."—*The New York Times Book Review.* 24 photos. $18.95

"My Heart is a Large Kingdom"

Selected Letters of Margaret Fuller

EDITED BY ROBERT N. HUDSPETH

"Hudspeth's selection of [Margaret Fuller's] letters is likely to win her new readers and admirers. . . . Had she survived, her public writings might have grown more like her private letters, capable of touching readers' emotions as well as their intellects."—*The Wilson Quarterly.* 8 illustrations. $29.95

Cornell University Press

At bookstores, or call (607) 277-2211 • www.cornellpress.cornell.edu

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Brown

RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

Two women and a child in a glade beside a spring. Beyond them, the varnished wilderness wherein bright birds cry. The child is chalk, Europe's daughter. Her dusky attendants, a green Indian and a maroon slave.

The scene, from *Democracy in America,* is discovered by that most famous European traveler to the New World, Alexis de Tocqueville, aristocratic son of the Enlightenment, liberal, sickly, gray, lacking the vigor of the experiment he has set himself to observe.

"I remember . . . I was traveling through the forests which still cover the state of Alabama. . . ."

In a clearing, at some distance, an Indian woman appears first to Monsieur, followed by a "Negress," holding by the hand "a little white girl of five or six years."

The Indian: "A sort of barbarous luxury" set off her costume; "rings of metal were hanging from her nostrils and ears, her hair, which was adorned with glass beads, fell loosely upon her shoulders. . . ." The Negress wore "squalid European garments."

Such garments are motifs of Tocqueville's pathos. His description intends to show the African and the Indian doomed by history in corresponding but opposing ways. (History is a coat cut only to the European.)

"The young Indian, taking the child in her arms, lavished upon her such fond caresses as mothers give, while the Negress endeavored, by various little artifices, to attract the [child's] attention. . . ."

The white child "displayed in her slightest gestures a consciousness of

---

Richard Rodriguez has written two memoirs, *Hunger of Memory* and *Days of Obligation.* This essay is from *Brown,* the third book in what he calls his "trilogy on American life." It will be published this spring by Penguin Putnam. He has contributed three essays to the SCHOLAR.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

superiority that formed a strange contrast with her infantine weakness; as if she received the attentions of her companions with a sort of condescension."

Thus composed: The Indian. The Negress. The white child.

". . . In the picture that I have just been describing there was something peculiarly touching; a bond of affection here united the oppressors with the oppressed, and the effort of Nature to bring them together rendered still more striking the immense distance placed between them by prejudice and the laws."

At Monsieur's approach, this natural colloquy is broken. He becomes the agent of history. Seeing him, the Indian suddenly rises, "push[es] the child roughly away and, giving [Monsieur] an angry look, plunge[s] into the thicket."

The Negress rests; awaits Tocqueville's approach.

Neither response satisfies the European. The African, Tocqueville writes, has lost the memory of ancestors, of custom and tongue; the African has experienced degradation to his very soul, has become a true slave. "Violence made him a slave, and the habit of servitude gives him the thoughts and desires of a slave; he admires his tyrants more than he hates them, and finds his joy and his pride in the servile imitation of those who oppress him."

The bejeweled Indian, alternately, is "condemned . . . to a wandering life, full of inexpressible sufferings," because European interlopers have unbalanced the provender of Nature.

And Tocqueville remarks (a fondness for fable) that whereas the Negro's response to mistreatment is canine, the Indian's is feline. "The Negro makes a thousand fruitless efforts to insinuate himself among men who repulse him. . . ." The Indian is filled with diffidence toward the white, "has his imagination inflated with the pretended nobility of his origin, and lives and dies in the midst of these dreams of pride." The Indian refuses civilization; the African slave is rendered unfit for it.

But cher Monsieur: You saw the Indian sitting beside the African on a drape of baize. They were easy together. The sight of them together does not lead you to wonder about a history in which you are not the narrator?

These women are but parables of your interest in yourself. Rather than consider the nature of their intimacy, you are preoccupied alone with the meaning of your intrusion. You in your dusty leather boots, cobbled on the rue du Faubourg St.-Honoré. Your tarnished silver snuffbox, your saddlebag filled with the more ancient dust of books. You in your soiled cambric. Vous-même.

A boy named Buddy came up beside me in the schoolyard. I don't remember what passed as prologue, but I do not forget what Buddy divulged to me:

If you're white, you're all right;
If you're brown, stick around;
If you're black, stand back.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was as though Buddy had taken me to a mountaintop and shown me the way things lay in the city below.

In Sacramento, my brown was not halfway between black and white. On the leafy streets, on the east side of town, where my family lived, where Asians did not live, where Negroes did not live, my family's Mexican shades passed as various. We did not pass "for" white; my family passed among white, as in one of those old cartoons where Clarabelle Cow goes shopping downtown and the mercantile class of dogs does not remark her exception. As opposed to Amos and Andy, whose downtown was a parallel universe of no possible admixture. And as I easily pass in these pages between being an American and regarding America from a distance.

As opposed, also, to the famous photograph of a girl in Little Rock in the pages of *Life* magazine. A black girl, no older than Alice, must pass alone through the looking glass. I remember wondering what my brown would have meant to Little Rock, how my brown would have withstood Little Rock.

In the Sacramento of the 1950s, it was as though White simply hadn't had time enough to figure Brown out. It was a busy white time. Brown was like the skinny or fat kids left over after the team captains chose sides. "You take the rest"—my cue to wander away to the sidelines.

My parents had come from Mexico, a short road in my imagination. I felt myself as coming from a caramelized planet, an upside-down planet, pineapple-cratered. Though I was born here, I came from the other side of the looking glass, as did Alice, though not alone like Alice. Downtown I saw lots of brown people. Old men on benches. Filipinos. Sikhs who worked in the fields were the most mysterious brown men, their heads wrapped in turbans. They looked like roses. And the Palestinian communist bookie—entirely hearsay—who ran a tobacco store of pungent brownness (the smell of rum-soaked cigars and cheap, cherry-scented pipe tobacco) was himself as brown as a rolled cigar, but the more mysterious for having been born in Bethlehem.

And as we passed, we passed very close to a young man, close enough for me to smell him, something anointing his hair. He was the most beautiful man I remember seeing when I was a boy. He wore a suit vest over his naked torso. He wore a woman's gold locket, with a dark red stone. He was petting a dog in the street. His pant knees were dirty. He smelled of coconut. He smiled brilliantly as we passed.

The missing tooth.

Heepsie, my mother whispered, taking me firmly by the hand, refusing his blazing notice with an averted nod.

A boy with a face as dark as mine, but several years older, stepped out of the crowd at the state fair to press a warm dime into my hand. Said nothing; wanted nothing, apparently; disappeared. His curious solemnity. But I interpreted—because I remember—the transaction as one of brown eyes.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A friend of mine, born and raised in Hong Kong, remembers attending British schools in Hong Kong; remembers being constrained to learn about India. My friend learned nothing about China; instead, the Gita, Lord Curzon, Mother Ganga, mulligatawny, Mahatma Gandhi. The British obsession with India—as its existential opposite—seemed to my friend an affront to China. But surely there was also a kind of freedom in growing up without the Briton's attention?

My uncle from India was several times called "nigger" by strangers downtown in Sacramento. His daughter, Delia, forbade the rhyme I learned at school. *Eenie, meenie, mynie, moe.* . . . But her eyes softened as she corrected me, and her mouth softened.

Brown is a bit of a cave in my memory. Like Delia's eyes.

Lights up, then, on "Theme from a Summer Place," on blue and gold and electric-guitar strings. A decade on. I am staying for a month of summer in Laguna Beach with the family of my best friend, Larry Faherty. I am covered with a cool film of Sea & Ski, as is Larry, though I suspect the insistence on this precaution by Larry's mother is gratuitous in my case. Larry's mother is sitting on the deck with a neighbor, a red-faced woman with protuberant pale blue eyes, penciled eyebrows. The bug-eyed woman burbles into her tomato juice cocktail, "some niggers . . ." (ah, ah, ah, I can feel the hairs lift on the back of my neck) ". . . some niggers came onto the beach over the weekend . . ." (she glances at me while she is saying this; her eyes are needles; I am the camel) ". . . we let them know they weren't welcome." It is not clear where I fit into her use of the first-person plural. Finally, however, my presence does not disturb her narrative.

Years later, the same story, a different summer—Columbia, South Carolina. A different storyteller—a lawyer in New York—rehearses his famous anecdote, "The Hawaiian Stranger," in three passages; two tumblers of Scotch.

1. It is summer, 1944; World War II is coming to an end. (There is no tragic coast to this story; the boys in it will not taste the tin can of death.) The lawyer's mother, gallantly streaming, has decided to invite a bevy of "boys so far from home" from a nearby army base onto her lawn for a Fourth of July picnic. Of course a complement of young ladies has been invited as well, Sallys and Dorothys, women from town and from the college.

2. The day dawns golden. Syrup and mosquitoes. The hired help arrive first, disinterested capable hands. By and by, the young men arrive. Smiles, sweat rings, aftershave. The young women arrive also, in summer dresses. There will be games to put the gentlemen at ease. The women arrange themselves in wicker chairs, sip cool drinks, and appraise the gentlemen from the shade of the porch.

Volleyball.

But "South Carolina in summer . . . ," the lawyer sighs, five decades later, rattling the ice in his glass.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

3. Scotch #2. Conspicuous among the young recruits is a tall brown man with short-cropped hair. The Hawaiian. "Poor Mama. 'Another Coca-Cola, Mr. Cooke?' (She could just about manage that one.) But, during the volleyball game, Mr. Cooke sheds first his shirt, then his T-shirt." The narrator remembers the sight of brown shoulders, brown nipples, a navel that tempted vertigo—"Why do we remember such things, and not who invented the cotton gin?"—and the sweat streaming down Mr. Cooke's rib cage; his flared nostrils.

(Poor Mama.)

Poor Narrator. Nevertheless, Mama keeps her stride, marching her fruit-bobbling sandals into the house and back out to the yard. More potato salad? Key lime pie. Lemonade. "Each time she'd pass me—I was sitting alone under the shade tree—she'd detour. She'd come around the trunk of the tree, bend down so close I could smell her powder—she pretended to be fixing my collar or working on my cowlick—but her whisper came down furious as a flyswatter: 'He isn't either a nigger, you mind yourself, he's Hawaiian.'"

Stories darken with time, some of them.

The first book by an African-American I read was Carl T. Rowan's memoir, *Go South to Sorrow*. I found it on the bookshelf at the back of my fifth-grade classroom, an adult book. I can remember the quality of the morning on which I read. It was a sunlit morning in January, a Saturday morning, cold, high, empty. I sat in a rectangle of sunlight, near the grate of the floor heater in the yellow bedroom. And as I read, I became aware of warmth and comfort and optimism. I was made aware of my comfort by the knowledge that others were not, are not, comforted. Carl Rowan at my age was not comforted. The sensation was pleasurable.

Only a few weeks ago, in the year in which I write, Carl T. Rowan died. Hearing the news, I felt the sadness one feels when a writer dies, a writer one claims as one's own—as potent a sense of implication as for the loss of a body one has known. Over the years, I had seen Rowan on TV. He was not, of course he was not, the young man who had been with me by the heater—the photograph on the book jacket, the voice that spoke through my eyes. The muscles of my body must form the words, and the chemicals of my comprehension must form the words, the windows, the doors, the Saturdays, the turning pages of another life, a life concurrent with mine.

It is a kind of possession, reading. Willing the Other to abide in your present. His voice, mixed with sunlight, mixed with Saturday, mixed with my going to bed and then getting up, with the pattern and texture of the blanket, with the envelope from a telephone bill I used as a bookmark. With going to Mass. With going to the toilet. With my mother in the kitchen, with whatever happened that day and the next, with clouds forming over the Central Valley, with the flannel shirt I wore, with what I liked

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for dinner, with what was playing at the Alhambra Theater. I remember Carl T. Rowan, in other words, as myself, as I was. Perhaps that is what one mourns.

In the Clunie Public Library in Sacramento, in those last years of a legally segregated America, there was no segregated shelf for Negro writers. Frederick Douglass on the same casement with Alexis de Tocqueville, Benjamin Franklin. Today, when our habit is willfully to confuse literature with sociology, with sorting, with trading in skins, we imagine the point of a "life" is to address some sort of numerical average, common obstacle, or persecution. Here is a book "about" teenaged Chinese-American girls. So it is shelved.

I found this advice, the other day, in an essay by Joseph Addison, his first essay for the *Spectator*, the London journal, Thursday, March 1, 1711. "I have observed, that a Reader seldom peruses a Book with Pleasure, 'till he knows the Writer of it be a black or fair Man, of a mild or cholerick Disposition, Married or a Bachelor, with other Particulars of the like nature, that conduce very much to the right Understanding of an Author. To gratify this Curiosity, which is so natural to a Reader. . . ."

It is one thing to know your author—man or woman or gay or black or paraplegic or president. It is another thing to choose only man or woman or et cetera, as the only quality of voice empowered to address you, as the only class of sensibility or experience that is able to understand you, or that you are able to understand.

How a society orders its bookshelves is as telling as the books a society writes and reads. American bookshelves of the twenty-first century describe fractiousness, reduction, hurt. Books are isolated from one another, like gardenias or peaches, lest they bruise or become bruised, or, worse, consort, confuse. If a man in a wheelchair writes his life, his book will be parked in a blue-crossed zone: "Self-Help" or "Health." There is no shelf for bitterness. No shelf for redemption. A professor of Romance languages at Dresden, a convert to Protestantism, was tortured by the Nazis as a Jew—only that, a Jew. His book, published sixty years after the events it recounts, is shelved in my neighborhood bookstore as "Judaica." There is no shelf for irony.

Books should confuse. Literature abhors the "typical." Literature flows to the particular, the mundane, the greasiness of paper, the taste of warm beer, the smell of onion or quince. Auden has a line: "Ports have names they call the sea." Just so will literature describe life familiarly, regionally, in terms life is accustomed to use—high or low matters not. Literature cannot by this impulse betray the grandeur of its subject—there is only one subject: What it feels like to be alive. Nothing is irrelevant. Nothing is typical.

It was only from the particular life—a single life, a singular voice named Frederick Douglass, a handsome man, anybody can see that, a tall man, a man who lived and died in another century, another place, another skin, another light, the light changing every hour, every day, within a room; he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

did not choose the room or the hour or the skin—that a brown boy in Sacramento could sense the universality of dissimilarity. The offense of slavery (the lure of literature) was that Douglass's life was precisely different from mine in California, a century later.

Now I am a writer, and now that my writing so often runs close to the boundaries of social science, I must remember that it is the reader alone who decides a book's universality. One cannot arrange a classic. It is the reader's life that opens a book. I am dead. Only a reader can testify to the ability of literature to open; sometimes this opening causes pain.

I mean to put you in company with the young African-American girl who discovers she is like Jane Austen. How so? In temperament, in sensibility, in some way she recognizes and approves. Then this thrilling recognition brings a cloud of shame to her spontaneity—I write of myself, of course—shame for what she intuits, shame for what she cannot share: that a novel from some unenlightened world is not fit for her. She is discouraged. Why it is unfit she cannot completely account for. (Because the sensibility she reads would be cruelly amused at the spectacle of her interest?) She notices her absence. Another girl her age, or a girl from another age, would not notice; would not need to notice.

The nescience of a book can undermine its clarity, can spoil our pleasure in it. Our age looks for exclusion. And there is a certain gumption missing from our age as a result, and from the literature of our age.

Helen Keller wrote that dust spoiled the feel of things for her. Simone Weil wrote that the music and the pageantry of a Nazi youth parade were viscerally thrilling to her.

Already in grammar school there were rooms in my reading life into which I would have been reluctant to admit Frederick Douglass, for I knew in those rooms he was mocked. *You must wait here, Mr. Douglass.* I made myself the go-between. I must come to the conclusion that the suite of mockery, though refined, though pleasing to me in most ways—a room of Thackeray's, perhaps—retained poisonous vapors of another age, and would not have admitted me. And yet these apartments existed uniquely in my imagination, nowhere else. In books, you say. But books must be reimagined, misunderstood, read. Readers repair to books as men and women to monasteries, none with an identical motive. I was the reader of Thackeray. These rooms, these weathers, these confidences from the dust must burn my ears if they were read out loud. But in my privacy I could regret that they could not be revised. I strained to restore them to the conditional. Clouds that might pass. The authors could not know what Frederick Douglass would have taught them. Were they damned? Was the crudeness of their imaginations commensurate with the way they made toast? Were books a sort of limbo, characterized by unchangeability? Books! They were damned, authors, not to know that what they dropped could not be revised.

I did not know until this year that Keats spoke with a cockney accent.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A scholarship boy, and sexually secretive, I was deaf to the rock 'n' roll blaring from the radio. I did not know that the great drama of integration—White with Black—was playing itself out under the guise of the Top Forty. I did not realize, as my younger sister did—she watched Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* each afternoon—that whites were emancipating themselves by dancing to Little Richard. I do remember that song called "The Name Game"—my sister could do it, I never could—in which an African-American voice (*Come on now, you try it . . .*) cheerfully played havoc with the American tongue. I remember laughing, dizzied by the freedom of the voice to play.

The Indian plunges into the thicket. The Negress awaits the white man's approach.

That part of America where I felt least certain about the meaning of my brown skin was also the part of the country I came to know best in my reading.

While my sister danced, I sat on shellacked benches on the Colored side of the Memphis bus station, felt underneath with my hand for dried gum. I drank from the Colored fountain. The fountain tasted of rust, and rust stained the basin and made it unpleasant. I could see where the White fountain was. There was no one about. I was human. I was thirsty. I was quick. As I bent my head to the fount, a hand grabbed me from behind, pulled back my head by its hair, my arms flaying for a purchase on my tormentor. I felt the knuckle—Oh my Jesus, I felt the gold ring boring into my scalp. I knew the ring from a thousand observations. I had seen it setting down a coin, raising a glass, grasping the reins of that red-eyed bay. I had seen it, often enough, raised in anger. I said his name out loud, *Please, mister. . . .* (All I know of life is this: Hair is amazingly strong, and I went with my hair, backward. If I had parted from my hair, I might have saved my life.)

While my sister danced, I watched Malcolm X interviewed on KCRA-TV, Sacramento. I noticed a fierceness in him and a criticism of White that made no distinction between good readers and bad. Something in his manner, something I recognized, rhymed with the scholarship boy I was.

I went alone. My evenings out in Sacramento were secretive. Insofar as they were experiments with adulthood, I wouldn't have considered bringing anyone else along. I went to hear Malcolm X alone, as I went alone to hear Marian Anderson. (Her red velvet gown. A baby's little blue cry pierced the golden disk she had spun. Silence. Shame for Sacramento! A nod to her pianist to resume.) When I went to hear Malcolm X, I felt as invisible, as anonymous, as safe as I have ever felt. The audience was overwhelmingly male. It was a busy black time. No one seemed to notice my brown in the crowd.

Malcolm X stood in a circle of light. He was not possessed of a theatrical power to transfigure himself. His amplified voice was nothing at all like what I expected. I expected the near-singing of ministers I had heard broadcast from the South. His voice was high, nasal, a scold's voice. A hick-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ory stick. But for all his thin stricture, there was something generous about this man, something of Benjamin Franklin—his call to brothers to better themselves. In his black mortician's suit, Malcolm X spoke of his early life, his years as a con, a hustler, cruel toward women because false to himself. His glasses flared in the spotlight.

What about that summer night was so thrilling to me?

There is shattered glass in the street. I am transported by James Baldwin to Harlem in the aftermath of a race riot. ("On the morning of the 3rd of August, we drove my father to the graveyard through a wilderness of smashed plate glass.") Among Baldwin's plays, I knew only *The Amen Corner* (Beah Richards played it in San Francisco). Among the novels, I favored *Go Tell It on the Mountain.* Most, I loved Baldwin's essays. There was to a Baldwin essay a metropolitan elegance I envied, a refusal of the livid. In Baldwin I found a readiness to rise to prophetic wrath, something like those ministers, and yet, once more, to bend down in tenderness, to call grown men and women "baby" (a whiff of the theater). Watching Baldwin on television—I will always consider the fifties to have been a sophisticated time—fixed for me what being a writer must mean. Arching eyebrows intercepted ironies, parenthetically declared fouls; mouthfuls of cigarette smoke shot forth ribbons of exactitude.

The Freedom March of 1965, from Selma to Montgomery, marked the turning point for the Civil Rights movement in the South. It became clear to America that the spiritual momentum of the march would carry the day; the South would bend.

Then the Negro Civil Rights movement, the slow sad movement of moral example, veered north, cooled, hardened as it climbed, to a secular anger. The Watts riots in Los Angeles of 1965 were the worst U.S. riots in twenty years. Young Negroes with no time to waste, no patience for eternal justice, renamed themselves "black." Their proclamation began a project of redefinition, not only of themselves and of their political movement but of power, of glamour. The Name Game was at once fierce and dazzling. Black America led white America through the changes. The equation of desire was going to be reversed.

Within the new insistence on blackness was a determination on the part of blacks to transform into boast all that whites had, for generations, made jest: curly hair, orange polyester, complexion, dialect, spiritual ecstasy.

When I was in high school, white boys inhaled black voices like helium. The Christian Brothers' Gaels drove off to a football game in the big yellow bus, windows lowered, the crew cuts singing a Little Stevie Wonder song in falsetto for the pure pleasure and novelty of squeezing their thighs to the highest pitch.

But the necessity, for a new black generation, of transposing shame into

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pride led to a dangerous romanticism. Segregation, de facto and legal, was transformed into self-willed exclusion—also a point of pride. Perhaps it was that the Negro Civil Rights movement of the South had been governed by a Protestant faith in conversion, whereas the northern black movement cared nothing for conversion.

Despite laws prohibiting black literacy in the nineteenth century, the African in America took the paper-white English and remade it (as the Irish and the Welsh also took their English), wadded it up, rigmaroled it, rewound it into a *llareggub* rap, making English theirs, making it idiosyncratically glamorous (*Come on now, you try it*), making it impossible for any American to use English henceforward without remembering them; making English so cool, so jet, so festival, that children want it only that way.

The only voices as blatant as black voices, as contentious, as alive in American air and literature, are those first-generation Jewish voices, skeptical, playful, dicing every assertion. The black-Jewish conversation was inevitable, for reasons of rhetoric, of history, of soul. As the American Indian had also been drawn, the Jew must have felt drawn to the African-American from some recognition of exclusion, expectation of exclusion. Unlike the Indian, however, the Jew had been shaped by a theology of the Word—a schooling that became, like the African's, a strategy for survival. And for a time, theirs was a brilliant alliance, the Black with the Jew. But the genius for verbal survival uniting Black and Jew would undermine their alliance.

"You cannot imagine how many times I need to squirt my eyes with Visine just to get through *Othello.* (So rage won't dry them out.)" An African-American graduate student addressed a roomful of English professors and graduate students at Berkeley. (This was late in the 1970s.) A Jewish professor immediately joined with "You can't imagine how difficult it is for me to read *The Merchant of Venice*" (assuming the alliance).

"Well, goddamn!" snarled the black woman in a stage whisper, her topknot vibrating, her eyes lashed to the notebook on her desk, "Jews always have to feel exactly what we are feeling, only more so."

Did you ever cross over to Snedens . . . ?

Snedens Landing is a pre-revolutionary town up the Hudson. I was fifty before I heard a recording of Mabel Mercer singing that brittle song. I don't care for the song. I like Mabel Mercer. She was a black Englishwoman who grew up in a theatrical family. She went to Paris at nineteen; she sang in bars, mainly for expatriate audiences, James Baldwin and others. From Paris, Mabel Mercer came to New York, became a fixture of the supper clubs there. She sat in a straight-backed chair, in a spotlight, her hands folded in her lap. She leaned slightly forward, as if imparting a confidence to her audience. The confidence she imparted was that hers was the most refined lyric sensibility in Manhattan of the 1950s.

Mabel Mercer performed the songs of Porter and Coward and such with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a perfect mid-Atlantic pronunciation, which is to say without a trace of melanin in her voice. This was not ventriloquism or minstrelsy or parody—I was disappointed to learn it wasn't, but the voice was authentic to Mercer, because she had been educated by British nuns who insisted upon public-school elocution. Another cabaret singer of that time, Anita O'Day, quoted in a book I can't find, described Mabel Mercer thus: "That chick has the weirdest fucking act in show business."

I would like my act to be as weird. An old brown man walking the beach, singing "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." I have, throughout my writing life, pondered what a brown voice should sound like.

I have pondered what a black voice should sound like.

On September 16, 1966—contemporary newspaper accounts reported a cool evening—the new Metropolitan Opera House opened in New York City. President Johnson and Mrs. Johnson were in attendance, as were President and Mrs. Marcos of the Philippines, as was U Thant, Secretary-General of the United Nations. The opera house, designed by Wallace K. Harrison, was a modernist pavilion with an arched façade, retractable chandeliers, murals by Marc Chagall.

The opera commissioned for the opening was *Antony and Cleopatra,* by the American composer Samuel Barber. Leontyne Price sang the role of Cleopatra. The Franco Zeffirelli production fused disparate motifs of colonial adventure in the manner of a seventeenth-century print. Zeffirelli's Egyptians were Elizabethan-Floridian. Leontyne Price wore an enormous feathered, beribboned headdress reminiscent of Amazonia, and a gown of Renaissance cut. She was costumed to appear bare-breasted, a caryatid of continental allegory—at once the African and the Indian of Alexis de Tocqueville's notice. At least that is how I remember the photograph of Leontyne Price in *Time* magazine; that is the image that comes to mind as I reread Tocqueville.

You are probably too young to remember, or perhaps you have forgotten, what a pride for America that evening was—the most modern opera house in the world prolonging the heartbeat of the nineteenth century, and with Leontyne Price, the reigning dramatic soprano of her day, enshrined at the center. And yet, the Metropolitan Opera seemed at that moment—eight o'clock, September 16, 1966—to mark the very crossroads of American history, the division of the old era and the new. Leontyne Price seemed the apotheosis of African America, of new America, as if uncountable degradations inflicted upon African-Americans might be ransomed by a single, soaring human voice.

That same year, 1966, there were thirty-eight race riots in American cities. And thirty-five years later, Lincoln Center looks irrelevant; there is talk in the papers about pulling it down.

That same year, 1966, I was in college. I typed, on erasable onionskin paper: "White southern writers had earlier preoccupied themselves with the deconstruction of the South along Grecian lines, a lament for pride

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

brought low and a contrition for the sins of the Fathers, all the while insisting upon kinship—the black maid's sigh, the white child's 'Why?'"

Black maid's sigh? White child's Why?

My forehead began to pain me remarkably, to throb; a sort of mockery seized upon my temples, then billowed from my ears, like black smoke from a stovepipe. A figment of my imagination stood before me:

Naw.
Listen, Hiawatha, honey, sittin by yo heatah,
Cradlin' little ninny books, playin' Little Eva. . . .

The figment was clothed with a red calico shirt and a voluminous apron with many pockets and colored patches sewn on, like the patches on jerkins and pinafores in a child's picture book. It wore a sort of turban on its head. The head was a tablespoonful of black wax, the size of a chunk of coal. It had eyes—large, lidless sclera with black balls painted in. But no mouth.

With one hand—a glob of glue stuck to its sleeve—it extended a tambourine, which it brandished menacingly (ah, ah, ah).

Ol' man Faulkner make me sigh,
Meek as Ella Cinder. Sigh?
Black maid's sigh?
Naw. Black maid's thighs was blackberry pies,
'Sall it was,
Coolin' on the winder.

No mouth, and yet it spoke. The voice had lips and tongue and breath and also a kind of history—each utterance was accompanied by a hissing, sparkling, ambient air, like that of an old recording with a gold tooth. The voice was parody, the only voice the figment owned, and as patented as wild rice.

Listen, Little Elbow Grease,
Peckin' on your pica,
Readin' Mod'n Library's
Bad as breathin' ether.
Ol' man Faulkner make you nod?
(Drunk in his mimesis.)
But don't you goddamn dare to try
Amanuensis me!

Reproach. This was Denial of Imagination. Copyright Infringement. Fear of Offending. Appropriation of Voice. Objection Sustained. Willful

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Misunderstanding. Preclusion. Scandal. Minstrelsy. Ah, I knew exactly what it was. This was a New Orleans doll manufactured in wax, in 1922, by Madame Granger, a Creole; this was Luther's doll, a figure of speech; my friend Luther's phrase, the phrase that elicited nervous laughter from me when I heard him use it in public: *You want I should pull nigger out the bag?* (As he addressed a recalcitrant store clerk.)

I bent once more to my typewriter. I wrote: "Faulkner strained to find the cadence of black patience and faith, creating his own forgiveness in the person of Dilsey—Dilsey hovering over her lost white charges."

Here he come, ol' skinny whey,
Sobbin' in his 'kerchief—
Whiney, piney, woe is me—
"The South, the South," he constant say;
He longin' for de dear ol' days.
And you as bad as he is. Why?
White child's Why?
You confusin' grief with biscuits.

—Why ain't there biscuits?—

'Sall it was.
Ain't enough I'm bought and sold,
Ain't enough I'm weak and old,
Still you goin' make me up—
Say I smell like copper-gold;
Pour me in some nigger mold—
Some malaprop, some black tar soap,
Some hangin' rope, some 'bacca smoke—
You make me up, you make me up,
I don't exist, goddamn you.

'Cept
Some 'Mimah flapjack mix,
Some Cream o' Wheat steam
Risin' swift to ol' whey's
Quiv'rin' nostril.
Soon
I free the slaves that lick my pots
And bubble the swill that fill you—
Slave as plain as buttercup,
Slave as hot as forget-me-not,
Slave as shrill as daffodil—
Slaves wear them yella jackets.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Faulkner strained to reproduce the cadence of Negro patience."

. . . Shoulda noticed the fire. Fiah. FIAH!

As a young man, I was more a white liberal than I ever tried to put on black. For all that, I ended up a "minority," the beneficiary of affirmative action programs to redress black exclusion. And, harder to say, my brown advantage became a kind of embarrassment. For I never had an adversarial relationship to American culture. I was never at war with the tongue.

Brown was no longer invisible by the time I got to college. In the white appraisal, brown skin became a coat of disadvantage, which was my advantage. Acknowledgment came at a price, then as now. (Three decades later, the price of being a published brown author is that one cannot be shelved near those one has loved. The price is segregation.)

I remain at best ambivalent about those Hispanic anthologies where I end up; about those anthologies where I end up the Hispanic; about shelves at the bookstore where I look for myself and find myself. The fact that my books are published at all is the result of the slaphappy strategy of the northern black Civil Rights movement.

Late in the 1960s, the university complied with segregation—the notion that each can only describe and understand her own, that education is a deeper solipsism, that pride is the point of education, that I would prefer to live among my kind at a separate theme-house dormitory, that I would prefer to eat with my kind at the exclusive cafeteria table where all conversation conforms to the implicit: *You Can't Know What I'm Feeling Unless You Are Me.*

In college, I revisited James Baldwin, seeking to forestall what I feared was the disintegration of my reading life, which had been an unquestioned faith in Signet Classics. My rereading of "Stranger in a Village" discovered a heavy hand. In the Swiss Alps, humorless *frauen* with crackled eyes go in and out their humorous houses, while on the twisting streets of the village, towheaded children point to Baldwin and shout after him *Neger! Neger!* ("From all available evidence no black man had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village before I came.") So what is the point of the essay? It seemed to me Baldwin had traveled rather far to get himself pointed at; to arrange such an outlandish contrast; to describe himself as an outsider. And, too, the Alps seemed to represent Baldwin's obsession, an obsession that now seemed to stand between us.

This was not a generous assessment on my part, not a generous moment in my life. As a young reader, I would never have noticed or objected to Baldwin's preoccupation with White to the exclusion of all other kind. In the 1950s it would have seemed to me that a Negro writer was writing about the nation in which I was a part, regardless of whether my tribe was singled out for mention. But when the American university began to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

approve, then to enforce fracture, and when blood became the authority to speak, I felt myself rejected by black literature and felt myself rejecting black literature as "theirs."

Neither did I seek brown literature or any other kind. I sought Literature—the deathless impulse to explain and describe. I trusted white literature, because I was able to attribute universality to white literature, because it did not seem to be written for me.

William Makepeace Thackeray mocks my mother's complexion. And mine. My smell. My fingers. My hair. Cunning little savage. Little Jew. Little milkmaid. Little Cockney. Really, how can I laugh?

The gym I attend in San Francisco is the whitest, the most expensive. Men and women read the *Wall Street Journal,* climb perpetual stairs pursued by grimacing voices.

Thump, thump, thump, thump. Stanzas, paragraphs, pages, hours, days, days, nights, days, *thump, thump, thump.*

Only Bach is as relentless, as monotonous, as cat's-cradled as hip-hop. Hip-hop is not music, in my estimation. (If music resolves.) Hip-hop does not progress, it revolves, replicates, sticks to the floor. It is not approximate emotion. It is approximate obsession. The "voice," the bard, the oracle, the messenger, the minister of propaganda intricately, saucily rhymes, chugs, foreshortens, sneers, insinuates, retreats. The voice betrays no emotion, has none; this is not rage but cleverness. Too wise. Too sly. A dictatorship of rhyme. There is a message; the message is masonic; the conveyance too dense, deep as a trance. The voice is preoccupied and always in the present. It is the voice of schizophrenia. It is bad advice. It is the voice of battle—Beowolf, Edda, the madder psalms—the voice justifies endlessly. What is going to happen if you don't stop this! On and on and on. Slamming the table. It is the postlude to music. Long after emotion has been flung from the bone, the beat remains. The beat plows through the rubble of music, turning under the broken arches of melody, stabbing about for rhyming shards—raising them, rubbing them together rhythmically—trying to ignite.

And what of the gym? They of the gym, we of the gym? Where is our allegiance? Is it to Queen Latifah or Gertrude Himmelfarb? And if we of the gym are somehow, unconsciously, and in thrall to madder music, arming ourselves, it is for a battle against what?

A few weeks ago, in the newspaper (another day in the multicultural nation), a small item: Riot in a Southern California high school. Hispanic students protest, then smash windows, because African-American students get four weeks for Black History month, whereas Hispanics get one week to celebrate themselves. The more interesting protest would be for Hispanic students to demand to be included in Black History month. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

more interesting remedy would be for Hispanic History week to include African history.

Hispanic students I meet on my speaking rounds complain of African-American students in their high schools or colleges. The complaint is that Black is preoccupied only with White; neither Black nor White will be dissuaded from a mutual vanity. I pretend not to understand the complaint. I play the adult. I answer the question with a question: *Why should they?* And then I turn around to write an op-ed about how the *New York Times* compiles a series on "race in America" that is preoccupied with Black and White.

I have not previously taken a part in the argument, the black-white argument, but I have listened to it with diminishing interest for forty years. It is like listening to a bad marriage through a thin partition, a civil war replete with violence, recrimination, mimicry, slamming doors.

I am not who I was. All the cells of my body have changed since I cradled Carl T. Rowan's book in my lap. I remain too much a cultural xenophobe, but also too convinced a mestizo, to permit myself to claim any simple kinship with Black, with partition America. African-Americans remain at the center of the moral imagination of America, which, I agree, is a very spooky place to be. Nobody else wants to be there, except by analogy. For it was there Africans were enslaved. It was there African-Americans hung by their throats from trees. *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.* And what has emerged from the cocoon of African-American suffering, cut down from the tree, buried for half a century?

The boom. The boom. Superfly. Ropes of gold surround his resurrected neck. The glamour of the dead-eyed man.

I dislike to hear hip-hop at my gym. I am unfair. Do I object to the restriction of the form—as strict as a villanelle? Do I object to an outlaw romanticism? Do I object to the cadence of the pulpit given over to quixotism? Do I object to the immoral lyric chugging along a rhythm track, only concerned with finding the rhyme for muthafucka?

But then I admit I've never wanted to bite the tongue. I may have mastered the tongue, but I have never felt the need—or the love, incidentally—to invent a new one.

. . . Shoulda noticed the fiah!

Yes, I should have. But shut up for a minute. A few years ago, on a book tour, I found myself in a radio booth, the disappointed author (having just read a dismissive review of my second book in the *Washington Post*). I put the review aside. Played eager-to-please. *Thank you for having me.*

You didn't have me. And you didn't want me. Not that it matters; it was a whorish transaction, I knew that. The movie director Spike Lee had preceeded me onto the program in the previous hour, promoting his movie

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

about Malcolm X. The African-American radio host suffered from time warp, *esprit d'escalier*—something he had said or left unsaid, I don't know.

So we remained shadows to each other, the interviewer and I. Departed Spike Lee was the only substance. At every break in the program, the interviewer would rise to pace the tiny studio, his body jerking with involuntary darns and double-damns—if only he'd thought to ask this or that.

He hadn't read my book. I watched the second hand of the clock on the wall. I didn't expect him to have read my book. I don't listen to his program.

I have been pondering what a black voice should sound like. A Baptist minister? An opera singer? A café artiste? Only to conclude that a black voice should sound like parody? That a brown voice should sound like rue?

No, that is not my conclusion. My conclusion is a measure of thankfulness: I cannot imagine myself a writer, I cannot imagine myself writing these words, without the example of African slaves stealing the English language, learning to read against the law, then transforming the English language into the American tongue, transforming me, rescuing me, with a coruscating nonchalance.

Come on now, you try it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Flood Gives a Millworker a Holiday

LELAND KINSEY

When the flood came
it sounded like all the clocks
in the world whirring.
My grandfather used to yell
at us a lot to get to work
but his bellow was nothing like the roar
of water taking out the bridge,
and there wasn't any work
anyone could do to save it.

It sounded like all the steam trains
were coming back through town
when the mill's heating room
went with hisses and belching
as the whole structure calved
off the rear of the great white building
like one of those icebergs
breaking into cold water
in a National Geographic special,
only the flume of flood spray
on abutments and foundations
washed more human shores.
The guy at the hardware store gave away
most of his shovels
but there wasn't anything to be shoveled
in front of all that water.
The flood marched through town

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with all the trimmings of a circus parade,
gingerbread porches and roofs
like fancy wagons, and a fine collection
of the town's wires like tinsel
and ribbon. The men on machines
trying to clear some various dams
or bridges were doing some kind of high-wire,
daredevil, wing-walking act
that they didn't get paid to do.

We used to get hired to clean up
after the circus trooped through town
and we thought all those mounds
of elephant dung were too much,
but it was nothing compared
to the muck and ooze the river
left as one swath of stink.
I found out the river took Mizz Johnson
right off her porch with her own big tree,
and there was a time as a kid
I would have paid a quarter
to see her, my teacher, taken just
that way, but I'd pay a lot more
to have her put back, and my house too,
but there's no damned ticket puncher
here to take that money.

Leland Kinsey lives in northern Vermont. His fourth book, *Sledding on Hospital Hill*, will be published by Godine this spring.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Key West

FRED D'AGUIAR

Dawn begins in my skull,
flits from right to left,
back to front as if searching
for an exit. I open my eyes.
Dawn builds a bedroom
instantly to house itself,
walls able to absorb light,
a ceiling for light to drip from,
floors with creases full of trapped
dirt only light can squeeze through.

I cross the bedroom to the window,
each muscle, every stretch
and contraction is a point of light.
The points expand and join, making
this body of bright bones,
translucent flesh and blood
for a battery. Let me open
those blinds. Let light
build a world barely able
to contain itself.

Fred D'Aguiar is the director of the University of Miami's Master of Fine Arts Program. His most recent book of poems is *Bloodlines.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bearing Arms

TIM MORRIS

Every time I walk through the big front doors of the public library in Arlington, Texas, ready to work my way across the national parks with Nevada Barr or down Sue Grafton's alphabet, I read this text painted on the glass:

> Pursuant to Section 30.06, Penal Code (trespass by holder of license to carry a concealed handgun), a person licensed under Government Code Sub chapter H, of chapter 411 (concealed handgun law), may not enter this property with a concealed handgun.

The same thing follows below in Spanish: "Conforme a la Sección 30.06, del Código Penal," etc.

Our librarians go to a great deal of trouble to make sure that people licensed to carry a concealed handgun know that they cannot take one into the library. But would it be okay for a licensed carrier to go into the library with an *unconcealed* handgun? Perhaps even to wave it about? Would it be okay for an *unlicensed* carrier to wander into the library with a handgun, concealed or not? Why the emphasis on stopping certain people from doing the very thing that the state has licensed them to do?

Not to mention the various other things that this little scrap of law is silent about. Is it okay to enter the library barefoot? Naked? In your bathrobe, clutching a pint of sloe gin and bellowing "I love Stockard Channing"? These are things I may need to know.

I learned (during an unarmed research visit to the library) that Texas law, while mute on the subject of Stockard Channing, prohibits licensed con-

Tim Morris is Professor of English at the University of Texas at Arlington. His previous contributions to the SCHOLAR include "Driving Myself Sane" (Spring 2001) and "My Supermarket" (Winter 2000).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cealed carriers from taking their guns into a business that "derives 51% or more of its income from the sale or service of alcoholic beverages." You can't pack a weapon in a prison, in a school or college, or at a sporting event. You can't carry your gun into government offices, airports, polling places, courtrooms, or racetracks. Also off-limits are hospitals, amusement parks, and churches.

That just about extinguishes my chances to carry a concealed handgun. I teach English at a college, work on the side as a sportswriter, vote quite a bit, and even though I've stayed out of prison for the most part, I am fond of the track. Libraries are unmentioned in the law, but there's a clause, the aforementioned 30.06, that says that anybody who doesn't want guns carried onto his property merely has to post the same sign that my library did in order to turn his place into a gun-free zone.

The 30.06 poster fascinates me. Why would anyone consider carrying a concealed handgun into the Arlington Public Library in the first place? Are there people who would feel safer sitting in Current Periodicals if they had 9mm semiautomatics in their belts?

Evidently, a lot of Texans would like to carry guns into forbidden places. Randell Galloway, a computer manager at the University of North Texas, told the *Dallas Morning News* that he disagrees with the no-guns-on-campus provision. "I think it's ludicrous having a gun-free zone," said Galloway. "They might as well post a big sign saying, 'Hey, criminals, we're all disarmed.'" His attitude intrigues me. Am I surrounded every day by villains who are restrained from villainy only because they expect me to pull out a handgun and shoot them?

One day I'm summoned for jury duty in an armed-robbery case. As I sit in the courtroom during voir dire, the prosecutor takes a straw poll of gun experience. "How many of y'all have guns at home?" he asks. Forty of the fifty hands go up. The prosecutor asks how many people have ever had a gun drawn on them, or have drawn a gun on someone else. A good twenty-five say yes. They begin to tell their stories: robbed at gunpoint, witness to murder. One panelist has, several times, played amateur deputy, freezing fleeing criminals with his concealed weapon, drawing on bad guys before they got the drop on him. One fellow gets a laugh by describing how he'd taken his shotgun out on his porch to stop someone from stealing a horse from his neighbor's backyard (only in Texas is this a routine situation). He gets the laugh because he has to admit the shotgun was unloaded. "We are very lucky to still have you with us," says the prosecutor.

The Texas State Constitution guarantees that "every citizen shall have the right to keep and bear arms in the lawful defense of himself or the State; but the Legislature shall have power, by law, to regulate the wearing of arms, with a view to prevent crime." Sounds more like a dress code than constitutional law, but then Texans like dress codes, too. In Texas, as long as you

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wear the right clothes, you can keep your house stocked with guns and pretty much shoot anybody you feel is threatening you. You're almost expected to do that.

The state constitution of North Dakota, in a garrulous burst, elaborates on the right of the people "to keep and bear arms for the defense of their person, family, property, and the state, and for lawful hunting, recreational and other lawful purposes." Other states are more nervous. Washington State says that "the right of the individual citizen to bear arms in defense of himself or the State shall not be impaired," but goes on to fuss that "nothing in this section shall be construed as authorizing individuals or corporations to organize, maintain, or employ an armed body of men." Is Microsoft planning something we should know about? Arizona has exactly the same provision as Washington, leading one to suspect that the constitutions of both states were written by the same consulting firm. Colorado gets moralistic about its fears: "nothing herein contained shall be construed to justify the practice of carrying concealed weapons." Take that, Texas!

Several states mention "hunting and recreational use," raising the question of what besides hunting constitutes recreational use of guns. Collecting, I guess. Target shooting. Possibly tossing tin cans into the air and plugging them, or emptying the magazine of your assault rifle on New Year's Eve. If you live in, say, Wisconsin, and can show that your random shooting into the air serves the purpose of "recreation," you may have a constitutional right to fire at will.

Some states sound a bit loopy. Maine has it that "every citizen has a right to keep and bear arms and this right shall never be questioned." This sounds a little like the kids on my junior high school student council who proposed that we all had an inalienable right to chocolate milk with our lunch. Then there's New Jersey, which says nothing about bearing arms but enumerates the rights of "enjoying and defending life and liberty, of acquiring, possessing, and protecting property." New Jersey doesn't say how, specifically, but you know, like, you just kind of, like, have a *right.*

Only in a few states—California, Minnesota, Maryland, and New York—is a right to bear arms unenumerated in the state constitution. Even a repeal of the federal Second Amendment, therefore, wouldn't have much impact on the way people in forty-six other states buy and carry guns. And in Texas, at least, we buy and carry them indiscriminately.

Or at least we talk as if we do. One morning I'm in the local meat market eating breakfast. Five guys working on an expansion of the eatery are lingering over coffee and newspapers. The one in the denim jacket asks the one in the red ballcap, "Whatever happened that neighbor of yours?"

"The difficult one?" asks Ballcap.

"Yeah, that one give you all that trouble. He sounded like he needed some settling down."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I settled him down," says Ballcap.

The other guys relax their grip on their newspapers, feeling a story coming on.

"He was outside my house one night, waving his arms around, raising hell," says Ballcap. "So I went out with my pistol and told him to get the hell off my property. That didn't convince him. So I had to blood him a little."

I get a very creepy feeling. I stare intently at my grits. Ballcap's audience takes the story in stride, however. They nod, they cluck. That's right, blood the man.

"He ran off," says Ballcap, "and he hasn't been back."

"Sometimes you got to show them," says Denim Jacket.

"I showed him," says Ballcap.

I want to penetrate Ballcap's brain and see what makes winging your neighbor acceptable. I'm not about to ask him directly. I'm not from here, and I often feel awkward inquiring about local customs. Going up to neighbors and asking them about their weapons is not advisable. The fellow who lives across from me, for instance, keeps a savage Rottweiler to frighten away gang members. (If there are gang members on our street, none of them is more than eight years old; but perhaps we owe our security to the Rottweiler.) My neighbor is not happy with me anyway, because I never mow my lawn. He rides past my yard on his mower, looking for an excuse to hop the curb and cut some grass. I don't really feel like asking his opinion on firearms.

I don't even know how to start asking questions. Until now, I've never fired a gun in my life. I've never held an operable handgun. The only firearms I've ever touched are three weapons my grandfather used to let me hold: an antique pistol too old to fire and two .22 rifles that he kept in his basement against the possibility of having to shoot something someday. Either I seemed like a trustworthy kid, or my grandfather was too far gone on rye and 7-Up to care. I was allowed to play with the rifles: to clean their stocks with soft rags, to stare down their barrels and admire the curious patterns of the rifling. At ten, I was a gun-accident statistic waiting to happen, but nothing bad happened. My grandfather never even loaded his guns, though he kept boxes of .22 cartridges at the ready. I marveled at the neat, mass-produced ammunition, running my fingers over the cartridges in the box, but I never dared to take out a bullet and put it into a rifle.

The guns I actually fired were all toys. I grew up in Chicago doing lots of things that would put me into a blind panic if my son were to do them thirty years later: taking aspirin during chicken pox, crossing Clark Street alone, playing with toy guns. It seemed that every kid in the 1960s had an arsenal. There were cowboy guns, brightly chromed and mostly just for show, though some fired caps—those little charges of gunpowder fixed on reels of paper like strings of hard-candy dots. There were ray guns that made space noises,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and frontiery flintlocks, and cheap metal carbines you could cock and recock until they fell apart.

But the standard-issue weapons of my youth were real-looking military firearms, molded in green and black plastic, life-size renditions of the miniature guns that my GI Joe carried on his tours of duty. My favorite had lots of interchangeable parts. It started as an oversized pistol, but you could add stocks, barrels, silencers, and sights until it became a full-blown assault rifle. It fired white plastic bullets, launched by an internal spring, that traveled a few feet before expending themselves in sofa cushions or my little brother. A few years later, the British army started firing plastic bullets in the streets of Belfast. Still a child, I wondered how the harmless little things I used to aim at my godmother's cats had turned into weapons of mass destruction.

One day I was strafing Devon Avenue when a big kid came up and asked to see my gun. He said he had one just like it. When I presented mine for inspection, he ran away with it. It was my introduction to a basic dynamic of human life: bullying without force, carried off by sheer brazenness. My mother happened along and pulled me home in my red wagon, chiding me for surrendering my gun. "After they take your gun, the next thing they'll take is your wagon," said Mama, sounding like a den mother for the NRA.

I played with real rifles and fired toy ones, but I never fired a real gun. My lack of experience with weapons was such that in junior high school, I found a shotgun shell on the parking lot and thought it was a lipstick case. Not many red-blooded American boys mistake ammunition for cosmetics, but I was one of them. And for years I lived in places—post-Vietnam left-wing Michigan, genteel nonviolent Princeton, relatively gunless New York City (where millions were scandalized by Bernhard Goetz shooting people, not even fatally, in the subway)—in which an accurate conception of ordnance was secondary to other social accomplishments. But somewhere at the core of my middle-American being, I knew that my cultural identity was linked, illogically but powerfully, to firearms. And now, surrounded by people who see guns as extensions of themselves, almost as vital as clothes or cars, I feel drawn to the trigger.

But where to begin? I'm an academic; my solution to everything is to take a course in it. My university doesn't offer Revolvers 101, but not to worry. In Texas, finding a handgun school is as easy as finding a steakhouse. It's considerably easier than finding a bookstore. Every corner in Arlington seems to have a gas station, a 7-Eleven, a drive-through drugstore, and a handgun shop. There's one on the nearest corner, between the tire store and the *taqueria*.

The place seems as good as any other. The window boasts of state-licensed training; a full range of fanny packs, pepper sprays, basic courses; and even "Advanced Courses" such as "Shoot/Don't Shoot Decision

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Making." (That's easy: don't shoot.) I stop by one day with my son Fran, after school.

You have to understand that Texans are squeamish about exposing their children to unchildish things. A Texan mother recently complained aggressively to me about the fact that Tinker Bell, in the movie *Hook*, kisses Peter Pan "in an adulterous manner." Texans don't like their kids around alcohol or cigarettes or Darwinism. The last time I took Fran—eleven years old—to the racetrack, the betting clerk solicitously told me that the boy would have to stand to one side as I put down my two dollars. "If they see him standing next to you," she whispered, "the police will sure come down on both of us." I considered telling her that it was Fran who had talked me into making a straight place bet instead of boxing the exacta, but I thought better of it.

I reckon, therefore, that the gun-store guy will have a fit when he sees my son in his establishment. But he doesn't care at all. As I go up to the counter, Fran starts checking out the holsters and the pepper spray. He gets to looking at a rackful of gun videos with titles like "How to Shoot Someone Who's Trying to Steal Your Car." Meanwhile, I try to sign up for the Concealed Handgun Course without acting like a complete idiot.

The gun-store guy asks, "You got a semiautomatic?"

"I don't own a gun," I correct him.

I'm concerned. I had figured that the course would be a pen-and-paper deal. Identify the parts of a gun, name three U.S. presidents who loved guns, tell us in a five-paragraph essay how guns helped build Texas. Was I actually going to have to *fire* the damn thing?

"I don't have much experience," I say, trying to imply that my experience is limited to bimonthly drills at the range, whereas it actually consists of having looked once or twice into the handgun case at Wal-Mart. "Do you think I could come in and do this course anyway?"

"Hell, yes," says the guy. "First target you shoot at ain't no more than three yards away."

I say I'll be there next Sunday.

Next Sunday, of course, I'd forgotten that we have other plans. We have tickets to the symphony, to see Van Cliburn come out of seclusion for the fourth time this year. My wife finds a friend to take my ticket; the hard part is explaining why I would pass up Van Cliburn to take a concealed-handgun class. Devastated as I am to miss Grieg's Concerto in A Minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 16, I pull myself together and show up at 8:00 A.M. at the handgun store.

Things start off okay. My classmates are four guys who look more or less like me, which is to say that they run the scale from two bearded white guys in plaid shirts to two beardless white guys in madras shirts. As a white guy with a beard and a Western shirt, I split the difference.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The gun-store guy takes our money and calls the class to order. "Any y'all liberals?" he begins. I try to look as right wing as possible. "I do *get* some now and then," he goes on. "I tell them, a liberal is just a conservative who hasn't been mugged yet." That said, he plunges us into the intricacies of handgun law. Ninety-day suspension of license for failure to show permit, class A misdemeanor for failure to conceal weapon, possible felony offense for bringing a concealed weapon into no-go areas. Don't leave your gun in your glove box, because if your wife borrows your truck and gets into a wreck, they'll jail her for carrying without a permit. "And if I got my wife thrown in jail, I wouldn't go down and bail her out. I'd be too busy fixing to move out of town." I toss my head and laugh merrily along with the others.

We learn that in Texas the identity of concealed-weapon carriers is confidential. Nobody can call Austin and discover that you have a license. At this point the instructor gets serious. "But you know," he tells us, "there's some crazy people out there. They can find out your vehicle records. They can find out your driver's license. They can find out where you live. Means you cut some guy off in traffic, he gets your plate number, he finds out where you live, he's waiting for you on your front step." The class expresses shock. "But you can stop that. You can make it so no one can find you. Just fill out this form and send it to Austin." He passes out forms. "Take this form and keep it as a master. Make copies for all your family members and friends. We don't want them finding out where we are." The class starts vigorously filling out the forms.

After we work through what to do if you're armed when the police stop you (abase yourself), the gun-store guy announces that we are going to head to the range and shoot. "Take out your weapons now," he says, "unload them, and put your magazines on the table." The guy next to me briskly unzips what I'd thought was a lunch bag and takes out a Luger. He lines up eight magazines next to it, perfectly parallel to it and one another. He's one of the beardless ones. His throat flushes above his madras shirt. I try to look casual.

"Those of you got no guns," the gun-store guy continues, "I'll take care of you when we get to the range. Now"—picking up the Luger—"here's some tips to remember when we're shooting. YOU SHOOT ON A WHISTLE. You do not shoot when I say 'Fire!' 'Fire!' is not a command. The whistle is a command. Every time I hold this damn class, there's some damn fool, I say 'Fire!,' he goes 'Bang!,' he shoots. You do that, you're off the range."

I stare at him. This is great, I think. We're being tested with live ammunition, and the test is a version of Simon Says.

The guy snaps a magazine into the Luger. "Now y'all do what I tell you when I tell you and nobody gets hurt." He proceeds to show us how to tilt the magazine into the gun, pull back the action, caress the weapon. Caressing, he tells us, is very important: hold firmly with your left hand, caress with your right. He waves the gun around nonchalantly as he speaks, point-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing it at the plate-glass window of his store. I make a mental note: crouch behind parked cars when you're in that lot from now on.

"Y'all ready?" he asks. We nod.

"Okay, here's how to get there." He pulls up a screen to reveal a big hand-drawn map of Tarrant County, Texas. He launches into a description of the directions to his range, way out west beyond the city limits of Fort Worth. Only then do I panic. This man is asking me to shoot a handgun for the first time in my life, after a course of training that consisted of watching him wave a gun around for about ninety seconds. Still, if he'd taken me in the back room and handed me a gun, I would have tried. But he's asking me to drive for forty-five minutes over roads I've never traveled, to some ranch with a beat-up sign down some country road two left turns after a Dairy Queen, and if I get to Weatherford I've gone too far. I can bear to make a mess of shooting, but I can't stand the humiliation of getting lost on the way.

So I quit. I become a gun-school dropout at age forty-one. For a day or so, this failure gnaws at me. It joins the list of my other failures: nursery school, swimming lessons, driver's ed, university administration. And now gun class! Worst of all, I don't have the courage to get my money back. Granted, the guy who has it also has a loaded pistol.

I'm at the Snug Harbor in New Orleans, listening to the first lady of song, Germaine Bazzle. It's been hard to find a hotel room this weekend; an enormous gun show is in town. Bourbon Street is clogged with guys in camouflage, guys in big belt buckles, guys in ballcaps that say "You Can Have My Gun—Bullets First," guys in cartridge belts, guys holding plastic hurricane cups in one hand and gun-show catalogs in the other. You can't move for the bellies and the boots. I ask myself why these guys can't, just once in a while, buck the stereotype.

But the Snug Harbor is warm and cozy and sheltered. I'm up on the balcony with my wife and son, waiting for the show. Below us sit a woman in a shirt patterned with engravings of duck decoys and a guy in a camouflage cap. He's thumbing through a catalog. Germaine comes on and starts her act. She missed the Saturday dance, she informs us, because she doesn't get around much anymore. My eyes wander during an interminable saxophone solo. Camo Cap is still reading his catalog. His hand fondles a glossy illustration of a sniper stock.

I wonder what he's doing in a club listening to jazz standards. How have we ended up in the same world, a world of gentle music and plaintive lyrics and racial harmony? Do we share an interest in jazz vocalists, or is he merely ticking off one of those things that you've just got to do while you're in New Orleans: eat beignets, listen to jazz, gape at a female impersonator? It's a free country, I remind myself platitudinously; it takes all kinds. Camo Cap's right to thumb through a gun catalog and my right to disapprove of him and Germaine Bazzle's right to sing the blues are all obscurely bound together in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

some order of rights that includes, of course, the right to bear arms. And Camo Cap would probably tell me that if I want to sit in safety and enjoy the music, I need to accept that an armed populace preserves my freedom.

As citizens, though, Americans have no idea what we mean by bearing arms. The Second Amendment, famously, can't mean what it says. Alone in the Bill of Rights, it starts with a clause that frustrates its interpretation. It apparently doesn't apply to the states. Some people treat it like one of the Ten Commandments (delivered, like them, by Charlton Heston), but others see it as a preposterous anachronism.

"A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State," the Second Amendment tells us, "the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed." That's the one-comma version; a three-comma version quaintly adds commas after "militia" and "arms." Debates over the significance of those commas rival debates of the procession of the Holy Ghost, and are just as fruitless, so we will skip them here. The main problem with the amendment is that clause about the militia. Does it mean that people have a right to bear only weapons that they're going to use in the militia? Or is it just superfluous sauce on the meaty main clause?

There is almost no case law on the Second Amendment. This lack of exegesis is shocking, given the flood of ink and bytes about the amendment. But it makes sense. Both opponents and promoters of guns are leery of bringing a test case before the courts. Most people think that liberals hate guns and conservatives are all for them, but that view is misleading. Left-libertarians can have an anarchic bent for guns; law-and-order rightists (including most police officers and sheriffs) would be happy to disarm the public. Who's to say where a Supreme Court would come down? The NRA might fear that even a "conservative" Court would decide that the militia clause was the determining part of the amendment. Gun-control advocates might fear that even a "liberal" Court would decide that the right to bear arms is absolute. Both sides seem afraid that the amendment might mean precisely what it says.

The Supreme Court has ruled in just one federal case on the Second Amendment: *S. v. Miller,* 307 U.S. 174 (1939). Two men, Jack Miller and Frank Layton, carried a sawed-off shotgun from Claremore, Oklahoma, to Siloam Springs, Arkansas. Having the shotgun was fine; their problem was that they did not have "in their possession a stamp-affixed written order for such firearm," as the New Deal National Firearms Act mandated, presumably to generate jobs for stamp-affixers. The lack of such a stamp offended, as the decision has it, "the peace and dignity of the United States."

Instead of just paying their fine and buying their stamp, Miller and Layton argued that their Second Amendment rights had been violated. They found a district court in Arkansas that agreed with them. The Supreme Court said that the district court was foolish. They ventured to doubt that a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sawed-off shotgun was your typical militia weapon. "Certainly it is not within judicial notice," Justice James Clark McReynolds wrote, "that this weapon is any part of the ordinary military equipment or that its use could contribute to the common defense."

Well, maybe not in some fancy East Coast lawyer's office, but in Arkansas . . . and therein lies a problem. McReynolds's opinion is tantalizing, because it seems to suggest that if Miller and Layton had had "any part of the ordinary military equipment"—let's say, a tank?—that might be okay. But I think McReynolds was just directing judicial dry humor at the Western District of Arkansas. If Miller and Layton had been hauled in for possession of an unstamped tank, I doubt the Court would have felt differently.

McReynolds was a stone conservative; the flinty liberals Hugo Black and Felix Frankfurter, however, concurred in the decision. And that's it. The Supreme Court is otherwise silent on guns, except in denying certiorari petitions as recently as 1983 to citizens who object to local gun laws—as I mentioned before, the Second Amendment does not apply to state and local governments, which are free to limit the possession of guns.

National custom reverses the language of the Second Amendment. Millions of Americans own small handguns, which are about as useful to a "well-regulated militia" as rocks and beer bottles. Meanwhile, the tools of a true militia—automatic rifles, machine guns, flamethrowers, antitank weapons, surface-to-air missiles, and armored personnel carriers—are flatly illegal for home use, and always will be. You can invoke the Second Amendment until you are blue in the face, but the Supreme Court will never, never interpret it to mean that you can keep tactical nuclear weapons in your toolshed.

I cannot stomach the thought of returning to Mr. Don't-Let-Them-Find-Us. I look through the Yellow Pages and find the number of a nearby pistol range. I want one-stop shooting. A woman with a honeyed voice answers the phone. Yes, they can set me up in a one-on-one shooting class. No experience, why that's just fine. They'll start me out with a range of weapons, so I can get a feel for the one that suits me best. And all this for just forty-five dollars, plus the cost of whatever extra bullets I stay on after class to shoot! My three-hour session is scheduled for next Thursday morning, and my instructor is named Ken. This sounds good. This is like therapy, only much, much cheaper.

Ken is not very wide awake when I get to the range in Fort Worth. He starts his lesson by putting on an NRA videotape and slipping out in search of coffee. The video features Susan Howard and Steve Kanaly, who used to be married to each other on *Dallas*, though not in real life. They seem at peace with themselves, and quite a bit younger than they did on the TV show twenty years ago, though that could be the effect of gauze over the camera lens. Susan and Steve want me to know that half of all American households own guns, and that there's nothing wrong with guns. Their main point is that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

people *enjoy* guns. The tape is emphatic but low-key, like a video on how to set up an Excel spreadsheet.

With each cup of coffee, Ken's pedagogy improves. He shows me the parts of a gun and asks me to repeat them. He shows me different kinds of ammunition. He goes over each one and the kinds of things you can shoot with it. Some are for dogs, most are for people. Some stop people better than others. Ken advises against a .25 ACP because it is an "anemic" round. If you want to shoot, you should shoot something full-blooded.

Ken reads me the NRA's three rules of gun safety: always point your gun in a safe direction, never put your finger on the trigger until you're ready to shoot, and always keep the gun unloaded until you're ready to use it. He lectures on the revolver/semiautomatic dichotomy, on the concepts of misfire, hang fire, and squib. He illustrates each theme with a cautionary tale of someone who was killed because he didn't grasp that part of the lesson. I wish I could get this kind of exigence into my classes on sentence diagramming.

After a quick review of the parts of a handgun, Ken starts to talk about How to Keep Them from Getting You. "They're looking for crippled prey," he begins. "When you're in the right-hand lane, they'll cut you off and force you up against the curb. When you're in a line at a fast-food restaurant after dark, they'll cut you off and rob you. When you get rear-ended at night, don't stop and get out; they'll steal your car. When they start to follow you, make three right turns, and if they're still following, drive to a police precinct." I have never before had such a vivid sense of being a juicy part of the herd, with predators lying in wait to cull me out.

Suddenly there is a fusillade of gunfire behind me. I assume it would not be a great idea to dive under the table, especially since Ken expresses no alarm. He pauses in his elaboration of the crippled-prey motif and says to me: "I wish you could have seen that." Ken stares in admiration at a large, potbellied man with a big gun. The man has just put ten shots through a tiny contour in the center of a silhouette fifteen yards away.

"There are very few people who can do that," says Ken. "He's a constable, he's here qualifying. He's one of the best. Very few are that good." I can't tell whether the constable is *enjoying* his gun, as Susan and Steve had suggested, but I guess that simply being *good* is tantamount to enjoyment. The constable is good at a specific motor skill, but his quality spreads over a larger expanse, spilling into the same areas of "good" that John Wayne and Dean Martin discuss at such length in *Rio Bravo*. I wonder if I will ever be "good," and I remember that I will soon find out on the range. I decide to get a cup of coffee.

When I come back, Ken has laid out a range of weapons to fit my hand. He tries me on Glocks, Lugers, Rugers. We settle on a .22 Ruger, light as a toy, and a 9mm Beretta, which has a pleasant James Bond touch about it. Ken starts to position me for shooting.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I want this to be fun for you," he emphasizes. Everybody seems to want me to have fun today. Shooting is a return to my childhood. I should always want to be a little boy, to play cops and robbers, to go "bang." Another hail of shots rings out behind me. I mind it less this time. "That's a Treasury agent," explains Ken, "here to qualify, too." I watch her. She's shooting at a drawing of a clean-cut man in a suit and polka-dot tie. The drawing looks oddly like Rod Serling. Rod is holding a pistol in a jaunty, Man-from-Uncle sort of way, and his tie is so bad that, on that account alone, it's clear he needs shooting. The Treasury agent isn't as good as the constable. She plugs the paper Rod Serling all over the place—in his shoulders, in his thighs, in his gun hand.

Finally we don ear protectors and go onto the range ourselves. Ken has me load five .22 magazines while he goes to grab a last cup of coffee. And then I release the safety of the Ruger.

I'd like to be able to craft what happened into a dramatic moment: my first shot, my initiation into blooding the neighbor, even if it's a neighbor made of paper. Instead, as I pull the trigger, I hear (beneath my ear protectors) a slight snap. The spent cartridge bounces away into oblivion, not even available for a souvenir. Downrange, I see a hole just below the center of the target. Ken tells me to keep squeezing the trigger. I pump ten shots into the silhouette—grouped well, but low.

"You just need to sight higher," says Ken. "But you're very consistent. You could defend yourself."

From what, I wonder. My worst fears are writer's block and getting older. I can't imagine that learning to shoot will protect me from them, but then I think of Hemingway.

Ken hands me the 9mm. It's very hard to load. "Let me get you a thumb-saver," he says, and he goes off, returning with a little plastic gizmo that makes filling the magazine a doddle. Then it's back on with my ear protectors, sight, practice breath control, and squeeze some more. The 9mm kicks more than the .22, but I'm still relatively on-target. As I work my way through my magazines, though, my shots wander down and off the silhouette.

"You're getting tired," says Ken. And I am, although I've spent no more than fifteen minutes basically standing in one place. We agree I should knock off for the day. Ken says I should come back any time, and he'll lend me his .22. He tells me to bring my son for a shooting lesson and some gun-safety tips. I nod and smile.

But I never do go back. I have touched destruction and found banality. The handgun, sexy centerpiece of so many movie posters, is in real life just another power tool. It is more lethal than most; but you can also efficiently maim yourself and others with a variable-speed router. A handgun is considerably less useful than a router, however, as its only real purpose seems to be putting holes in silhouettes, or in people.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As I stand in the range, pumping lead into a man of paper, I am aware of people in the other lanes doing the same thing—standing, aiming, hitting their targets. The whole thing reminds me of nothing so much as a bowling alley: the same bad shirts, the same potbellies.

"Did you see," says Denim Jacket over breakfast, "did you see in the paper here where these guards at Huntsville"—the most feared prison in Texas, site of its bustling Death Row—"where these guards are, you know, they're fixing to go out on strike, they're wanting better working conditions?"

"What'd they figure when they got the job?" asks Ballcap. "It's going to be like some luxury hotel?"

"They figure they'd be putting mints on pillows?" asks Denim Jacket.

Ballcap puts down his coffee and assumes an oratorical pose. "I have come to the opinion," he announces, "that they could fire all those son-of-a-bitch prison guards in Huntsville."

Denim Jacket chuckles, nervous. "What would they do then?" he asks. "What would they do down in Huntsville?"

"They wouldn't need but only one of the guards," says Ballcap. "The one with the needle."

Denim Jacket laughs. "The one with the needle, that's right," he says. "The one with the needle."

"And do you know what?" says Ballcap. "They could get him to work for free. They could put an ad in the paper, and they would get volunteers to work at that job for free."

"I'd do it," says Denim Jacket. "I'd do it for free."

There's a gun show in Mesquite, east of Dallas. I go over with my wife and son one cloudy Saturday. We know about it because there are pink Day-Glo billboards all over Dallas and Fort Worth that say GUN SHOW. The gun show is in an exhibit hall where they also stage things like comic-book fairs, model-train shows, and commemorations of the partition of India. Margaret and Fran have planned to drop me off, but when he sees the forest of firearms inside, Fran gets curious, so we buy three tickets. After looking at a gun or two, Fran gets bored again. He and Margaret go to the rear of the hall and get some Frito pies. I say I'll meet them later.

The first thing one notices about the gun show is a complete lack of interest in the NRA's first rule of gun safety. Everybody's pointing guns in unsafe directions, usually into thickets of customers. About half the crowd carry rifles with three-by-five cards taped to the muzzles, reading FOR SALE. A guard at the front desk checks to see that the rifles are unloaded, but there are thousands of rounds of ammunition on every table. People get interested in each others' rifles. They wave them around, they sight down the barrels into the crowd, they try the actions. Nobody says: "Excuse

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

me, would you mind awfully not pointing that gun at me?"

Most of the dealers display their guns pointed toward themselves, but a few point them outward. One table features a rack of rifles pointed at me, like the weapons of a phantom firing squad. Actions slam shut around me. Triggers click. One large, fat guy has a pistol in hand. He points it down into a table, dry-firing it. A guy totes two rifles into the men's room, strapping one on his back while he props the other beside the urinal. Guys in the Frito-pie line jostle each other; the muzzle of one guy's rifle catches in another guy's sweater. Sorry about that, he says, because this is Texas, we're friendly, we're not like New Yorkers.

One guy is selling hand grenades out of a tin pail; he assures me that they are "inert." Another has a .50-caliber "Desert Eagle" pistol, so huge it looks like a cartoon ray gun. There's a box of bayonets. There are bins full of bone-crushing .45 shells. There are knives everywhere: hooked, serrated, barbed, curved, twisted, hollow-bladed. Jagged swords that look like Smee's Johnny Corkscrew from *Peter Pan* share tables with ceremonial Japanese blades in rococo scabbards.

Everywhere I turn, there's something to read. One dealer hands me a free catalog. The cover shows a poster titled "We're Looking for a Few Good Men." Two dazed brunettes in bikini underwear and Marine dress caps stare off the poster, their mouths parted, their tongues pushed out. One is trying to pull off her bra; on her wrist is a heavy man's wristwatch, the face turned inward. I look up and see a banner: KEN HARRIS KNIVES—JESUS IS LORD.

Several dealers sell only books. The most popular author is the waggishly named Boston T. Party, author of such titles as *The Poisoner's Handbook* and *You and the Police*. There's a paperback edition of *Dear Mom: A Sniper's Vietnam*. On the next table, *Justifiable Homicide* and *How to Make Disposable Silencers*. There are several copies of *The Construction of Secret Hiding Places*, which sounds like a cultural-studies title from Duke University Press.

One bookseller, who looks a bit like Jesse Ventura, specializes in Don't-Let-Them-Find-You supplies, including such books as *Birth Certificate Fraud and I.D. by Mail*. He sees me taking notes, and comes over, perturbed. "What are you looking for?" he asks.

"I'm copying the titles of some of these books," I say.

"Why?" he says, flexing his arms, expanding his chest.

"I'm interested," I say, "in people's fear that other people can find them. That people want to hide themselves."

"It's interesting," he says, relaxing a little.

"There's so much on the Internet these days," I say.

"You know it," the ersatz Jesse says, becoming quite hospitable. "I just picked up the guy next door to me off the Internet. Got his driver's license number and everything. The guy's a convicted child molester."

I wonder why Jesse doesn't move. Maybe his house payments are really low.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"They can find out anything about you if you're not careful," he says.

When a more serious customer steps up and fingers a copy of *Entrapment: The BATF in Action*, I wander away. Not all the merchandise at the show is gun related. One man sells 1943 steel pennies from an overflowing teacup. There's a Cookie Monster Pop-Up Pull Toy, in its original box. There are homemade apple-dumpling-scented candles in Mason jars, next to bumper stickers that say "I Miss My Ex But My Aim Is Getting Better." One elderly fellow, coughing gently into a handkerchief, has a stack of Tony Bruno records, 45s, unpriced.

The Mesquite crowd is making even less of an attempt to swim upstream against stereotype than the gun tourists I saw in New Orleans. First of all, everyone's white, except for two black bouncers at the entrance. This is unsurprising, because the Confederate battle flag is pasted everywhere: on bumper stickers, posters, hats, shirts, belt buckles. A favorite fillip for the flag is a printed quip encouraging the viewer to Kiss My Rebel this or that.

The clientele present an eclectic mix of visual styles, including faux-lizard jackets, braided ponytails, ZZ Top beards, and XXXXXL overalls. I had not known that overalls came so big. There is a certain amount of plaid in the room. People also go in for multiple messaging, mixing Texas A&M T-shirts, for instance, with ballcaps that say "Casino Magic, Bossier City, La." I am wearing my Western shirt, jeans, and bull-leather boots, and for once in my life I feel overdressed.

From table to table the dealers wave, chat, touch base. They're making the rounds on the show circuit. They make plans to have dinner in Abilene, Tulsa, Hot Springs. The hall is packed. The barrels of rifles bob up and down every aisle. It's like a flea market under martial law. A guy walks past wearing a shirt that says "Personal Problems Solved with High Explosives." I laugh in spite of myself. The sensations, the stuff, are all coming too fast; I'll be giggling in the aisles if I don't find something to focus on soon.

I stop at a dealer's table. He has a collection of bore lights for sale, stacked in a Styrofoam cup. Ken at the range had told me that a bore light is a good thing to have. These are little pen flashlights with a hook of clear plastic at the end, useful for shining up the bore of your pistol so you can tell if it's blocked by a bullet without applying your eye to the muzzle. The bore lights in the cup are cheap and nasty; the plastic tip would come off the penlight after a few uses. I'm tempted, though: the little gadgets stare out of the cup at me, as if needing a home.

I see the dealer bent over the stock of a weapon, tracing its outlines lovingly. His customer is a collector, I tell myself, no different from a book collector, a stamp collector. This is no different from the book exhibit at the Modern Language Association convention—and certainly gun people on average can't beat English professors for vanity and professional cruelty, can they? Then I look again at the weight of metal on these tables. I wonder where all this ammunition will end up. I recall a line from Philip Larkin:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Shot out of sight, somewhere becoming rain. In front of me, Larkin's metaphor becomes literal again. The rain from all these bullets may kill a real person some day. I look at my kid, eating a Frito pie. The right to bear arms comes down to the casual death of thousands of kids like him every year, their snacks shot out of their hands as they wonder what happened. The dealer props up a stack of pamphlets on how to convert your semiautomatics to full. Slumping off his table is a display of T-shirts that read:

> The tree of liberty
> must be refreshed from time to time
> with the blood of patriots and tyrants.
> —*Thomas Jefferson*

It's the same shirt that Timothy McVeigh was wearing the morning of the Oklahoma City bombing. I don't think I'm going to buy one of this man's bore lights, after all.

September 13, 2001. I'm sitting in the meat market eating my breakfast. I sit well away from Ballcap and Denim Jacket; I don't have the heart to listen to them. Between spoonfuls of grits, I look up to see Ballcap miming the action of a semiautomatic, squeezing off shots at an imaginary terrorist. My grits start to repeat on me. I leave my tip on the table and pay my check. As I pass the door, I hear Denim Jacket mumbling through a mouthful of potatoes. "Kill 'em all," he says. "Kill ever' God damn one of 'em."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Delivering Eggs to the Girls' Dorm

B. H. FAIRCHILD

For me it was the cherry blossoms flooding
Olive Street and softening the dawn,
the windows flung open in a yawn,
billowing curtains pregnant with the breeze,
the sounds of Procol Harum entering the air,
and fifty girls rising in their underwear.

O lost love. My girl and I had just split up.
The leaves of chestnut trees were rinsed in black,
the wind moaned grief, the moon was on the rack.
Humped over, stacking egg crates in my Ford,
I was Charles Laughton ringing bells at Notre Dame—
spurned, wounded, but still in love with Sheila Baum.

Arriving at the gates of paradise,
I rang the service bell to wait on
Mrs. Cornish in her saintly apron
fumbling at the door, and the raucous gush
of female voices when she opened it. The flour
in her beard announced the darkness of the hour:

You're late. The hiss of bacon, pancake batter
as it kissed the grill, were a swarm of snakes to warn
the innocent away. Inside were virgins born,
like Sheila Baum, to stay that way. Outside
stood the egg man, despairing in his oval fate:
fifty girls staring, eggless, at an empty plate.

They may still be staring there. For emptiness
became my theme, sweeping egg shells
from my car, driving empty streets, fall's
cherry trees as bare as dormitory walls
washed by September rains. And the bells of Notre Dame
were as still as the broken shell of my dream of Sheila Baum.

B. H. Fairchild, a Guggenheim and Rockefeller Fellow, is the author of three books of poems, the most recent of which is *The Art of the Lathe*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Reading Balzac

MARGARET RYAN

Croissants and café au lait left at the door
in the morning. Hot baths down the hall,
hot water Henri later paid for. Well-off,
tight-fisted, intimidated by the hauteur
of Parisian waiters, Henri insisted
we eat cheap: steak pommes frites
in cafés, fresh peas shelled in the street.

My long braids looped up near my ears,
I wore blue jeans or peasant dresses.
Cars slowed at corners. Parisians stared.
Jean, a friend of Henri's, made it clear:
I was Utterly Provincial. Embarrassed
to find myself so simple, I stayed in.
The two men toured the sewers.

I read in bed the book I'd bought
at Orly on an impulse: Balzac, *The Black
Sheep*. I met the widow Bridau and her sons:
Philippe, fond of military splendor, fought
with ardor at Waterloo beside Napoleon.
Joseph, the younger, an aspiring painter.
Their *pauvre tante* who played the lottery.

Madame's brother, an idiot, in Issoudun,
controlled the remnants of the family plunder.
His "housekeeper," the Fisherwoman,
a local beauty and an orphan, planned
to steal the money with her lover,
the bastard Max. He led the Knights
of Idleness between black paper covers.

Henri returned, singing the sewer's praises.
Closing the book, I heeded Balzac's warning—
Hide any true feeling like a treasure
or you will be lost. So I hid my pleasure
in the text, acted as if I'd missed him,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pretending interest in Parisian drains.
Next day, at open stalls along the Seine,

I leafed through books. I could have sworn
the shrewd-faced men who sold them
knew where Joseph should have gone
to place La Descoing's Christmas bet
with his own coins. (Philippe ransacked
her mattress, stole her cache of gold,
squandered it on cognac and roulette.)

When Joseph finally found the office
it was closed. His aunt consoled him:
twenty-one years, and she'd never won.
Next morning, neighbors came to say
Congratulations on your fortune. What?
Her numbers had come up! She cried,
"Three million francs!" and, stricken, died.

They say women are never old enough
to read Balzac. I was twenty, hungry.
The book devoured me. At the Lido
(Henri's splurge) the plumed, half-nude
showgirls (I was certain) rendezvoused
with Philippe. Between games of billiards
in dubious cafés, he wrote reviews.

On quiet days, I thought, the girls would pose
for Joseph in his chilly studio. But Paris
got too hot. We flew to Copenhagen.
Henri shopped extensively for silver.
Crossing Hamlet's rainy Denmark on a train
for Scotland—Henri's destination—
I learned how Philippe's cruelty gained

the upper hand with his old uncle.
He bested Max, wed the Fisherwoman
And brought the girl to Paris, introduced
her to society, to satin, lace, liqueurs
and opium. Abandoned to the arms of men,
she died in a freezing garret all alone—
except for Joseph and his painter friends.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Back in New York, Henri and I took
taxis to Turtle Bay and Sutton Place, to look
at town houses waiting to be done up
in faux bois, brocade, and gilt. Eyeing
the rewards for bad behavior, I thought
only of the Fisherwoman, come to town,
dressed in printed calico, ill-kempt—

As I am, decades later, in the country.
I am rereading all of Balzac,
longing for Paris, myself at twenty,
too hungry to love. House guests
this weekend. I plan a simple dinner,
sauté a chicken, pick lettuce from the bed
outside my door, read the Sunday papers:

An actress my age takes a callow lover.
The school's headmistress, nearing fifty,
is still so lovely her old friend, the mayor,
offers, in return for *certain favors,*
congenial changes in the zoning law.
She's "hesitant." Brokers manipulate
the market; girls undo the President.

Children fill our wooden houses
with laughter, summer's native tongue.
We gossip over coffee and croissants:
the doctor's cocaine deal gone bad;
embezzlement that sends the CPA to jail;
another marriage for the Hong Kong
banker—this time, the girl who did his nails!

I still know the price of Balzac's gloves
and waistcoats, the agony of a young scholar
ashamed of his inadequate toilette.
Sometimes, late at night, I tell the story
of a student, traveling with a dull
but moneyed lover. How they stayed,
until the city got too hot, in Paris, near the Opera.

Margaret Ryan is a freelance speech writer and poetry teacher at the 92nd Street YMHA. Her work has appeared in several anthologies, as well as in such magazines as *The Nation, The Christian Science Monitor,* and *Barrow Street.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Optilenz

CAROLINE HELLER

My father is scowling into the screen of Optilenz, his swollen hands gripping its platform as if it were the steering wheel of a car in a downpour. Optilenz, a machine designed to help people with macular degeneration to read, looks much like a computer but has a lens capable of magnifying any text or picture up to fifty times its normal size. Bob Schwartz arrived with it this morning. If my eighty-five-year-old father buys it, Bob, who used to teach blind children in a public school classroom in Chicago, will not only teach him how to use it; he will also be available whenever my father has questions or difficulties.

Optilenz was recommended by my father's ophthalmologist as a last resort for his failing eyes. "Dr. Heller," Dr. Rosen said yesterday—I went with my father to his appointment—"it's either the machine or never reading again. I wish I had better news." He led my father out of his office, his arm around his shoulder; the comradeship of doctors, and of old men. "Call Bob Schwartz. You'll like him." Dr. Rosen must be nearing eighty himself, yet is still in command of his professional life, practicing medicine, walking tall. Little by little over the last few years my father, who was once a well-known hematologist, lost all that—shrinking into himself more each day, walking with difficulty, losing his hearing, then his sight, and lately, though his vital organs remain strong, his wish to live. He's told me this several times in the last few months. Even if he hadn't told me outright, it's a truth I'd guess even if I didn't want to know it. His father killed himself. His brother and three of his best friends did, too, as did my mother's father. I always imagined it as an Old World trait—something I might well

Caroline Heller teaches educational research and writing at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her first book, *Until We Are Strong Together,* was published in 1997. She is working on a book that will tell her parents' story through the literature to which they turned before, during, and after World War II.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

grow into myself, an inclination living latent inside. Sometimes my father slips in his wish not to live as a little joke, an endearing play with language. If there's anything that keeps his blood moving now, it's his language play, the ground that the Jews of Prague, his people, walked on. Yesterday, as the two of us cleared old papers and outdated medical books from his study, and I hauled them away in boxes and huge black garbage bags, my father, having looked and behaved crabby and stern all day, suddenly broke into a sly little grin as I hoisted the last bag over my shoulder and walked out his study door. "Wait!" he called after me. "I forgot to put myself in!" That little grin, making me forgive yet again the dark self-absorption that's been his signature mood all my life (and, I've little doubt, all of his), and is getting worse.

I like Bob Schwartz immediately—his buoyant, hopeful manner: "You're going to be amazed by this miracle machine, Paul." My father hates it when a stranger calls him Paul. One earns that right. To a stranger he is Dr. Heller. Cringing, he puts up his hands as if to tell Bob he's already stepped over a line. "I'm going to have you reading in no time," Bob continues. "Though it won't be like holding a book, it will be better than you ever imagined." My father frowns, unconvinced.

"*Mám na to kursy,*" he says to Bob. It's a phrase the Czech comic Werych was famous for saying on the streets of Prague when my father was a boy. Werych positioned himself on a street corner, where he freely dispensed counsel to all who didn't ask, and then used the encounters in his comedy act. "*Mám na to kursy,*" he would say, when people asked him how he could be so sure of the advice he offered. "I took a course!" My father says it when he thinks someone is a charlatan. He says it often.

Once Bob sets Optilenz on its own table in a corner of my father's study, I marvel at its ease of operation and design. Bob asks me to bring a book with which to practice. I choose one from the pile on my father's night table. Under the lens, the small, grainy letters of Milan Kundera's *The Art of the Novel* become magnificent and bold on the machine's screen. The two men fiddle with the knobs as Bob shows my father how to change the magnification and the texture of the background until the letters are as well defined as he can make them. My father looks increasingly sour.

The previous night, putting myself to sleep in the tiny basement bedroom of my father and stepmother's house, I had combed through an ancient *New Yorker* lying on the nightstand—a leftover from a visit by my brother Tom, or by Tony or Rick, my stepmother's sons. I came upon a cartoon of a man with a pompadour haircut, wearing a formal suit. He is sitting in an armchair holding a newspaper—or rather, fisting it, and glaring at a woman sitting in the neighboring chair, toward whom he casts the most horrible look, his tongue hanging out of the corner of his mouth, one eye squeezed shut as if what he might see if he opened it would be unbearable,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the other eye bulging from its socket as if to attack. The woman asks, with the calmest look on her face, "And just exactly what is that expression intended to convey?"

I am nothing like this woman. My father—who, for most of this week that I've stayed with him while my stepmother is away, has resembled the man in the cartoon—is driving me crazy. Everything, every day, has been "catastrophic" in his eyes: the weather; our failed plans to go to the symphony; my clothing; my preparation of the garbage and recycling for pickup; the dreadful motives of Elizabeth, the Polish woman who has cleaned my father and stepmother's house weekly for ten years, and whom he accuses of breaking the toaster when he can't find the right lever to toast his bread, of breaking the slide-out trashcan when he pulls it off its hinges, of throwing out his right slipper when he can find only his left. "Vat has she done again?" he asks under his breath as he emerges from his bedroom, holding the lone slipper and giving me a look that implies that in Elizabeth's absence, I should consider shouldering the blame.

Now he glares at the screen, wearing the *New Yorker* man's face, the rims of his eyes red with fatigue. "*Es ist alles für die Katz!*" he says. "This is acrobatics. Not reading! I'm getting seasick! It makes reading more impossible. I know this already!"

I recognize the German phrase from my childhood. "*Für die Katz!*" "Not for humans!"—literally, for the cat. Throughout my life, he's used it to describe many things—a bad meal, a bad book, a bad day. "*Für die Katz.*" As a child I would jump to my feet, wanting to remedy in an instant whatever was wrong, as if my sheer will and good intentions could make the book improve or a meal please him more. At these moments, an anxiety rose to my shoulders that I suspect has never fully left—just quelled and surged over my lifetime, depending on my father's proximity and mood.

Now Optilenz is *für die Katz*. But he continues practicing, moving the platform, reading the words from the page of Kundera, slowly, like a schoolboy. "Ah, Kundera," he says, momentarily brightening. "I own zis book too!" He breaks my heart.

"It *is* your book," I tell him. "I took it from your night table." I want my father to catch on, to get hip, to get young—traits he never had, even forty years ago when his hair was jet black and his face unlined. I look at his chubby fingers vigilantly, indiscriminately adjusting knobs and pushing buttons even after he's told Bob that the level of magnification is to his liking. My father's fingers froze fifty-five years ago on a death march between Auschwitz and Buchenwald, making his hands permanently bluish and bloated. As a child I always saw them, of course, through the mandates of my own place and time, registering mainly that they weren't like the long, slender-fingered hands of my classmates' fathers—those that confidently gripped hammers, pliers, baseball bats, or their children's hands. Almost more than his sad green eyes, my father's hands seemed to me a mirror

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of his soul, holding little of life with grace or certainty. This I always knew, though he ruled our house with an iron fist.

"How do I make it bigger?" he asks Bob, softening a little, becoming more interested in the options of the lens's effect on the text below. Bob directs him to the button that enlarges the size of the letters on the screen. "How do I make it smaller?" Bob leads him to the correct button again. "Vat else will it make smaller?" my father asks, that slight look of mischief appearing—the look that always redeems him in my eyes. "When I write you the check to buy it, will it make the amount smaller?"

"Eyes bad, humor good," Bob says.

My father reads the opening paragraph of Kundera, haltingly, with great deliberation:

> In 1935, three years before his death, Edmund Husserl gave his celebrated lectures in Vienna and Prague on the crisis of European humanity. For Husserl, the adjective "European" meant the spiritual identity that extends beyond geographical Europe (to America, for instance) and that was born with ancient Greek philosophy. In his view, this philosophy, for the first time in History, apprehended the world (the world as a whole) as a question to be answered. It interrogated the world not in order to satisfy this or that practical need but because "the passion to know had seized mankind."

"*Ja,* vell, that is certainly an opinion that needs to be honored and discussed, but Kundera is wrong about the date," my father says, looking to his left and fixing his stare on the wall. "It vouldn't have been 1935. It must have been 1933. Husserl vould have been an emigrant and it vas harder to come into Prague after 1933." He speaks now in his lecturer's voice, with which he is always at his best, turning from the wall to his real audience, taking Bob on as his student (along with me, always me), explaining to us that Husserl was a famous phenomenologist. "I barely remember now if I went to his lecture," he says, "but I probably didn't because I had many other things to do then. I probably studied for my exams. This was always the case. I don't remember whatever became of Husserl. He may have become a Nazi in the end. *Na,* this is terrible that I can't remember! This happens to me always!"

From here he tells us about Rudolf Carnap, his favorite philosopher when he was a medical student in Prague. Then everyone had a favorite philosopher. They were the currency. Philosophy, literature, politics—almost interchangeable, catalysts for all things worthy. Rudolf Carnap was a neopositivist, my father explains. He always debated Husserl's ideas in his Saturday-morning lectures, which my father regularly attended, and where he sometimes spotted my mother sitting closer to the front, often beside his brother Erich. "Carnap believed that everything could be solved by an equation, and somehow this was absolutely fascinating to me," my father

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tells us, Bob now leaning on the bookshelf, while I'm cross-legged on the floor. "The board was covered top to bottom with equations. Absolutely incredible! Always an idea underneath!"

My father no longer looks anything like the *New Yorker* man. Next to the zipper of his tightly belted, floppy pants is a patch of dried jam from his breakfast, and the lapel of his white sports jacket—which he wears for guests and had hastily put on for Bob's arrival—is dotted with caked egg. His head, besides his hands the only thing about him that remains round and fleshy, seems nearly too big for his shrinking frame, and so fixed into a looking-down position that Bob has to keep reminding him to hold it up to read the screen. But to me he looks forceful and professorial. I suspect Kundera got his dates right (though for most of my life I would have put my money on my father), but never mind. My father's world is up there on the screen of Optilenz—his prewar Central Europe, its celebrated ideas, its great debates, its eminent men: a time and place that still delivers air and meaning to him; a world in which, before the war that ended it, he had been a young player.

Minutes after Bob leaves, he makes a trip down the hallway to his bedroom, replete with challenges to Bob Schwartz's veracity—"He's a pushy businessman. Vy does he sell these machines? I suspect he's not to be trusted. *Es ist schlecht um die Welt bestellt*" (the world has become a bad place). And before I can respond, my father is asleep.

In the middle of the night, I'm awakened by footsteps above my basement room. From the door to the kitchen, I see my father sitting perfectly still at his place at the breakfast table, sipping a gin and tonic from a tiny Winnie-the-Pooh tumbler left behind by one of my stepmother's grandchildren. He looks like a furry little ghost, hair in disarray, his thin, wrinkled torso covered with a mossy white mane, his baggy undershorts accenting the boniness of his scarred, hairless legs. "If you see couple of eyes lying around," he says, as if all along I'd been standing there and there'd been no interruption in my attention to his eyesight, "I take them!" He laughs at his joke and, with a look of pride, points to the hallway, now cluttered with odds and ends from his study—his small metal shelf filled with medical reference books; a cardboard file box crammed with letter paper, stamps, and old keys; a set of mahogany drawers that had once belonged to his brother Erich, overflowing with photographs and old clippings. He lifts his glass and raises it to the hallway. While I'd been asleep, from midnight until now, four in the morning, my father had been busy rearranging his study to make a place for Optilenz. "I did some cleaning," he says. "*Kvi*et like a *Kirchenmaus*" (a church mouse).

There is an old German word, *verbissen,* that my brother and I heard from the time we were very young. My father said it to us when we were weary of a task we had to complete for school or a chore he wanted us to do at home.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Verbissen: once you commit to something, you sink your teeth into it and hang on. My father is the epitome of *verbissen,* all my life showing the strength and energy of two men if he wanted to accomplish something.

In spite of his doubts that anything can help him read again, my father's *Verbissenheit* had brought Optilenz to a moonlit corner by the window of his study, where now on its platform lies a tiny cloth volume of Stefan Zweig's *Sternstunden der Menschheit* (Star Hours of Mankind), its old German script filling the screen. Arranged in a row on the floor next to Optilenz, as if waiting in line, is an old yellow cloth book of German nonsense poems by Christian Morgenstern, an equally old collection of poems by Joachim Ringelnatz, and two volumes of *Joseph and His Brothers,* by Thomas Mann. Sixty years ago, just before the outbreak of World War II, my father had wrapped these books, along with several other favorites—Stendhal's *The Red and the Black,* a collection of Mann's novellas, a volume of Goethe's poems, a book of woodcuts by Frans Masereel that tells a story in pictures—and sent them to his brother's former fiancée in New York for safekeeping.

In the upper-right corner of the title page of the little Zweig book is my father's name written in youthful, bold fountain-pen script, and the date of the purchase: 1929. "I vas bright then and now *ausgewiegelter Schwachsinn,*" he says when I note the date. "*Schwach!* Feeble! I need to get a new head," he tells me, pressing down on the top of his thick white hair as though trying to release something, answer something. "I'm interested to know what Zweig wrote about Goethe. Goethe came to Marienbad when he was seventy-four years old, and he fell in love. He wanted to begin his life again. I want to know what Goethe found there. Seventy-four years old! He wrote the famous poem, *Marienbader Elegie,* there, near Komotau. I visited there often. '*Sternstunden*'! Kind of *Schmockerei* [a little pretentious]! You can't really translate this! Zweig tries to be original—starry hours, decisive moments. One about Napoleon, one about Dostoyevsky, and this one about Goethe coming to Marienbad and falling in love and writing this famous *Elegie. E-LE-GIE. . . .*" he repeats after a long pause, drawing out, singing its syllables, while he holds his little cup of gin high in the air, as if toasting the word, the poem, or saying good-bye.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Accent

BARRY NEWMAN

"Stanost," says Stan Ost, introducing himself in his office at Speech Remodelers, Inc., in Summit, New Jersey, where he helps sign up foreign English speakers for accent-reduction therapy. A New Jerseyite via Brooklyn, Ost hasn't quite made his name understood, so he spells it out for me—in a Brooklynese that lives up to Brooklyn's reputation.

What sort of accent does Ost think he has?

"None that I know of," he says.

Accents are things other people have, and in the United States, lately, there are a lot of other people. Many of them are convinced that Americans would like them more if they sounded more like Americans, so the accent-reduction business has charged in to teach them how to do it. In New Jersey, a large number of these other people come from South Asia. Most are middle-class, educated, and have spoken English fluently since childhood. Yet Ost can't understand them.

"They have a different way of breathing," he says. "They studied English, but they didn't study the way to pronounce the words."

To illustrate, he plays a message left on his answer-phone by a potential customer, a man saying his name and number. Ost is stumped; to his ear, the caller is so needful of accent reduction that his cry is unanswerable. To my ear (I've been to the subcontinent a few times), the caller's name sounds like Than Shankar. Later, when I dial the number, Than Shankar picks up.

"Just left a message on the voice box," he says. "Didn't speak to anyone." Shankar says he works as a computer consultant in New York, and arrived in the U.S. only a few months ago. His accent hovers between Sri Lanka and

Barry Newman has been a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* since 1970. A foreign correspondent for twenty-one years, he is now a feature writer based in New York, specializing in immigration.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

North London, where he spent the past ten years. The therapy he phoned about, I explain, promises to steer his tones toward the Great Lakes.

"Yeah!" he says. "That's what I'm after, actually."

But if Ost doesn't need his accent reduced, why does Shankar? Or Nkrumah? Or Chan? Chicagoans who say "meary Meary mearied" when they mean "merry Mary married" manage to make themselves understood without accent therapy; why enroll Latinos who mean "ship the cheap sheep" when they say "cheep the cheep cheep"? The notion of "accent reduction" implies the possibility that somewhere—Ohio? Wisconsin?—there exists an Eden of accent-free talk, a spot no linguist has ever located. In fact, Americans have sucked in and chewed up words and sounds from indigenes and immigrants for centuries. The *Oxford Companion to the English Language* calls our speech "a rich gallimaufry of exotic and native stuffs." "Gallimaufry" comes from French; it means "hash." So why not stir in a spoonful of Shankar's mulligatawny?

One reason is that talk ought to communicate. Any student of a foreign language knows that pronouncing words correctly—or pronouncing them, at least, as some natives do in a country where that language is native—is part of the drill. Plenty of America's newcomers whose English is different, though clear and fluent, just feel like going native. "I'm here," Shankar tells me. "So, I want to be, like, part of the people."

Yet the flip side of this passion to assimilate might be the pressure to conform. While snubbing someone who speaks unintelligibly may qualify as miscommunication, snubbing someone with a strange accent sounds more like prejudgment. The distinction between accent and unintelligibility creates a zone of anxiety for foreigners, not just for poor immigrants but for techies, doctors, and college teachers who want nothing to hinder their chances here. The way they speak English—even grammatically perfect English—can shape the course of their lives. There haven't been any "accent pride" marches yet, even as the number of Americans with un-American accents closes in on 30 million. Language activists have had their fill with bilingualism and Ebonics; defenders of immigrant rights are busy carving out hospital-interpreter privileges for new arrivals who barely speak English at all. Foreign accents bump against the consciousness of "unaccented" natives only when we order in an ethnic restaurant, say, or catch a cab in New York City. To get a feel for the accent anxiety of that untalkative Bangladeshi driver (who is probably working on his master's), you need only to look through the classified sections of immigrant magazines and the Web sites where accent reduction reveals itself. It is a small-scale industry, of course, but one symptomatic of a larger-scale bias that most of us who were born here don't know exists. Its ads remind me of nothing so much as come-ons for hair-straightener and skin-lightener, circa 1940.

Here's the pitch for Accent Services USA, which sells relief in the form

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of a computer program: "Most accents are charming, interesting and distinctive," it goes. "Some accents, unfortunately, are distracting, irritating and penalizing. . . . Accents can hamper performance, can adversely influence advancement and promotion, and may be a source of concern and embarrassment." Dozens of accent reducers make similar cases. Accent Reduction Training: the A.R.T. of Communication advertises: "Your program will be personally designed to address the phonetic error patterns that interfere with effective communication. If you have ever felt self-conscious, embarrassed, or frustrated in everyday speaking situations, you need to master the A.R.T. of Communication." Kealy Communications helps foreigners "adopt an American English accent with its unique vocal muscularity" and sends a free article, "Five Tips for Looking Good as You Improve Your Communication Skills," to all who inquire.

The therapists, most often, are speech pathologists, trained not in the nature of language but in the clinical treatment of people with speech defects. In the mid-nineties, cuts in Medicare reimbursements sent many speech pathologists on a hunt for fresh income. In accent reduction they discovered the cash potential of the new immigration, and saw a chance to dress the elocution lesson in a lab coat. Arthur Compton, speech pathologist, psychologist, and founder of a San Francisco company called the Institute of Language and Phonology, says five thousand pathologists have gone into business using his accent-reduction books and tapes. The cost of a session can run from $25 to $150 and up. Thousands of immigrants—Compton says his institute has trained forty thousand—have achieved, by his calculations, a "reduction" in accent of at least 50 percent. "The mechanical part of speaking," Compton says over the phone in the Midwest accent many Americans would think of as unaccented, "is nothing more than an elaborate, habituated system of movements of the mouth. It takes a trained person to change those habits. That's what speech pathology is all about. From an idealized standpoint, accent reduction is irrelevant—but tell that to the person who didn't get a job promotion because of the way he talks."

The founder of Speech Remodelers, and Stan Ost's employer, is a proponent of accent reduction and also one of its products. Dr. Harish Malhotra's office, across from Ost's, is at Overlook Hospital, in Summit. Malhotra is chairman of the Department of Psychiatry; finding therapists for the foreign-accented is a sideline. As he extends a hand across his desk and smiles, the doctor shows a set of teeth as white as Chiclets. He's had them bleached.

"People like your smile and immediately have positive rapport with you," says Malhotra. "There is a whole research." He puts accents and teeth in the same box. His brochure cautions that people "estimate the intelligence of others by the way they speak," asserting that "four to eight hours per month are wasted" by those who must repeat themselves. Less accent, more rapport.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As the doctor says, "This is all the fine tuning of human relationships."

Malhotra is a Punjabi whose father managed banks all around India. He grew up speaking Punjabi and Hindi, but from primary school through post-graduate medical school his language of learning was English. He was a public speaker, a debating-society star, and when he immigrated here to practice psychiatry in 1973, he assumed that New Delhi and New Jersey were tied by the same tongue. "I did not know I had an accent," he says. "Many times I wondered, why don't people understand? I am saying it so clearly." One day in 1987, he met a speech therapist. The doctor recalls, "She said, 'You are Indian, right? You have certain sounds. I can help you sound more American.' And I said, 'Professor Higgins!'"

After thirteen years, Malhotra talked to the *Economic Times of India* about his makeover. "He has almost a New York accent," wrote its correspondent. Or he would, if Amritsar were a stop on the A train. The doctor grinds his *r*'s, says *farst* for *first*, *sarvant* for *servant*. George Bernard Shaw wrote that "the change wrought by Prof. Higgins in the flower girl is neither impossible nor uncommon," but Harish Malhotra still sounds like Harish Malhotra.

"In spite of all my effort," he says, "I cannot change my *r*'s because they are harsher sounds. The idea is to reduce your accent so you will become understandable. It is impossible to remove an accent, unless that is your aim of life. You will always remain Indian at your heart."

Pygmalion notwithstanding, our accents are pretty much set in stone by the time we reach our early twenties. Late bloomers and gifted learners are more malleable; dialogue coaches do train actors to produce foreign sounds for sets of lines. Yet it's a rare student who can't be pegged for a foreigner, and a rare actor who can fake his way through a three-course meal. Accent reducers never promise "accent elimination," because they can't deliver it. Their clients may come away happy enough if Americans just quit treating them as tourists, but it's the "unaccented" American accent, whatever it may be, that is dangled before them as the key to the golden door.

Accent identifies. It gives away race, national and regional origin, class, schooling. It sets people apart. It's a shibboleth. And a convenient tool for quick judgments. No matter how thick, certain accents connote prestige to American ears. Speaking English, the French sound romantic, the Germans cerebral, the British highborn. By cultural reflex, other accents invite disdain. Think of the adjectives we reserve for them: thick, heavy, broad, flat, strong, guttural, nasal, sing-song, adenoidal, provincial. Southerners and Jerseyites, too numerous to take much guff, share the cellar of the domestic accent league. Indians are close to the bottom in the foreign standings. Indian English, as much a true variety of the language as Australian English, has 330 million speakers and at least as many accent gradations as American English. Fresh off the plane at JFK, the subcontinent's doctors, professors, and engineers speak what's called "educated South Asian English." They therefore

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

provide a good test of our tolerance for unfamiliar accents, since the uneven proficiency of other immigrants can't be part of their problem. Yes, some of what they say will be tough for Americans to follow at first. But no matter how clear, their accents will pigeonhole them here as something less than romantic, cerebral, or highborn. The only Brahmins who haven't sensed something of that in America probably come from Boston.

"I remember my first experience when I came to this country," Achal Mehra says. "I went up to an immigration officer. He asked some questions. I responded, and he said, 'Excuse me, do you speak English?'"

Dr. Merha edits *Little India*, a thoughtful freesheet out of Reading, Pennsylvania, that struggles with questions of the immigrant psyche. Merah comes from Luknow, in Uttar Pradesh, and speaks in a brisk, analytical style that, to me, makes Americans sound wooden. "Even today," he says, "when I teach"—he is on the faculty at Albright College—"on my student evaluations, I get comments: 'He's a great instructor, but he might want to improve his language.' This accent! They view it as not proper command of the language. I know Indians who love baseball, who are more American, if you can define that term, than many Americans themselves. That is what they desire to be. But those Indians who do this accent reduction out of shame and a feeling of insecurity—which is a motivating factor for a majority of these people—they trouble me. Some of the concerns are genuine. I'm not sure you can put your finger on it any more than you can put your finger on race generally. But language, the way we speak, is one of our defining characteristics. It's simply that people are ashamed of what they are."

A couple of years ago, Sharon Glaser noticed an accent-reduction ad that Dr. Malhotra had placed in the back pages of *Little India*, and she soon signed on as one of his associated therapists. Glaser is a forty-year-old orthodox Jewish speech pathologist who lives in Edison, a New Jersey town where the South Asian population has now hit twenty-nine thousand, a third of the total. Edison is a 1950s suburb of wide lawns and curvy streets with a strip mall where the fast-food joints serve samosas and pappadums. Glaser suggests we meet at the public library, a modern building that has a post in its front lawn with a prayer for peace painted on it in four alphabets. In the reading room's carpeted quiet, a Chinese man scans a tax return, an Indian woman checks the MSNBC Web site. Another woman, with a red bindi dot on her forehead, studies a shelf of Western novels and picks out one titled *Rogue Mustang*.

Glaser arrives, wearing a black beret and a purple velvet blouse, and we sit in a glassed-in study room talking about her childhood. She grew up in a two-family house in North Bergen, a Jewish-Irish-Italian town that took on touches of Cuba and Puerto Rico as she went through high school. Her grandparents immigrated from Poland, and from either Russia or Ukraine, Glaser isn't sure. "We had a map once," she says. Her mother was born in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Weehawken, her father in the Bronx; he worked for a state banking department, she was a travel agent. Her Yiddish-speaking maternal grandmother, who came to America in the 1920s, lived with the family. She had learned to speak English in night school, like Leo Rosten's fictional Hyman Kaplan, who conjugated "to fail" as "fail, failed, bankropt."

"I think I remember how she spoke," Glaser says of her grandmother. "The vowels were long. A lot of immigrants use long vowels when they should be short. Her grammar wasn't good." Still, as she recalls it, her grandmother's English was as good as fluent. At home, Glaser's parents conversed in a mixture of Yiddish and English, passing on the odd phrase to their daughter. In college, Glaser attended a Yiddish class until it disbanded for lack of interest. With echoes of Eastern Europe in her New Yawk tawk, what she speaks today might be called "educated North Jersey English."

In 1985, Glaser graduated from Columbia University with a master's degree in speech pathology. She worked in hospitals with victims of stroke, respiratory failure, throat cancer; people with persistent hoarseness and swallowing problems; people who needed machines to speak. She still does. But with her clinical earnings in decline, she supplements her income now by taking in immigrants to New Jersey who are afflicted by Indian accents. Glaser hasn't visited India. She would like to try the food, but Edison doesn't have a kosher Indian restaurant yet. Her reading on India consists of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, whose title story recounts a visit to Orissa by an Indian family from New Brunswick. Glaser has no knowledge of Hindi or any of India's other languages. To prepare for reducing Indian accents, she attended training sessions with Arthur Compton, of the Institute of Language and Phonology, on one of his New Jersey swings.

"The vast majority of what I do is help with the sounds that they are not pronouncing according to standard American English," she explains. "Say I have an Indian speaker who, instead of saying, 'I had a good *vacation*,' says, 'I had a good *wacation*.' That person is not putting their top teeth into their lower lip well enough to make a clear 'V' sound. That person has to be taught, shown, what they have to do to get that 'V' sound out. These forms of remediation are very similar to what I would do with a child who's learning that sound, or a stroke patient. Moving their tongue to the right spot takes a lot of work."

Glaser describes the ultimate objective in her own gender-cleansed dialect: "That Indian speaker may not want to be someone who someone listening hears them sounding a little weird. If a person feels that their speech is an impediment to how they're being perceived by others, then, you know, it is too bad others are perceiving them that way. Go back to our grandparents who came here with their lousy English skills, and how they were treated—probably very poorly. The broad result is to make them a more comfortable speaker of English. More comfortable in America."

In *The American Language*, H. L. Mencken chided the "schoolmarms" who

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

taught night-school classes—like the ones Sharon Glaser's grandmother attended—as "the chief guardians of linguistic niceness in the Republic." "Such persons," Mencken wrote, "do not advocate and practice precision in speech on logical grounds alone; they are also moved, plainly enough, by the fact that it tends to conceal their own cultural insecurity. From them come most of the gratuitous rules and regulations that afflict schoolboys and harass the writers of the country. They are the chief discoverers and denouncers of 'bad English.'" Mencken gave the schoolmarms credit, though, for having "thrown themselves valiantly against the rise of dialects among us" and for insuring that "nothing so unpleasant to the ear as the cockney whine" would arise in the land. Two generations later, the role of bringing outsiders into the national fold and keeping us whine-free falls to second-generation-American accent-reducers.

What is it about foreign accents that our auditory nerves find so unnerving? Perhaps it's the loss of meaning that can't be conveyed by words alone. Like computer programs stripped of invisible codes, unfamiliar accents transmit language without the messages encrypted in tonality, pace, pitch, and inflection. For some foreigners, this can seem liberating; I spent years frequenting English country-house weekends safe in the knowledge that no one could peg me for a peasant from Queens. More often, foreign sounds cue distrust, exclusion, and alienation; Americans struggling to make themselves understood in India face the same rejections by students, bureaucrats, or street vendors that Indians face here. In supersensitive America, though, accent discrimination lacks the elements—race, religion, age, sex and sexual inclination, national origin, speaking other languages entirely—that make other forms of discrimination so obviously unlovable and legally demonstrable here. In a society where every subgroup has its protectors, we have no inkling of the unfairness factor in the way we treat people who don't sound the way we do.

Not long ago, Nancy DiTomaso, a professor at the Rutgers Graduate School of Management, made an attempt to compile some data on accent bias. She asked twenty American-born research-and-development managers how they felt about their Asian employees. All replied in terms of language: They can't write; they don't speak English. Yet every one of the managers thought less of their South Asians, who spoke and wrote English readily, than they did of their East Asians. "I interpret it as a color bar," DiTomaso surmises. "South Asians are darker. And they're more likely to have advanced degrees than U.S.-born people, so there's also a perception of arrogance. They're not in their place. They're here; they're not grateful." But correlating degrees of bias to levels of English proficiency was beyond DiTomaso's methodology, and, in defining accent bias, the U.S. legal system hasn't come any closer.

"We do not, cannot under our laws, ask people to change the color of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

their skin, their religion, their gender," Rosina Lippi-Green, a linguist and novelist, writes in her 1997 book, *English with an Accent*, "but we regularly demand of people that they suppress or deny the most effective way they have of situating themselves socially in the world." Ill will toward alien accents, she concludes, is "so commonly accepted, so widely perceived as appropriate, that it must be seen as the last back door to discrimination."

In 1981, Lippi-Green reports, the school board in Lagargue, Louisiana, fired an Indian librarian because of a "heavy accent." The librarian sued, but got a blurry court decision and never returned to her job. In 1987, a Hawaiian weatherman with a local Creole accent sued after he was turned down for a radio job. A speech pathologist testified at the trial that the weatherman should "seek professional help in striving to lessen this handicap." The job went to somebody else.

By 1992, this legal view had evolved a little. Five Filipino guards at a U.S. Treasury Department building in San Francisco, educated English speakers, were fired that year because a boss couldn't grasp what one of them was saying. Their civil-rights complaint was upheld by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Since then, a Nigerian in Rhode Island, a Trinidadian in California, and a Vietnamese in Seattle have won accent-discrimination claims. In June of 2000, a California federal court found in favor of a Palestinian engineer passed over for promotions by Contra Costa County because, said its hiring officer, he talked "like he had his mouth full of something." That was after the man had ranked first out of sixty applicants in an oral interview.

The EEOC has now made hiring bias based on language and accent a "litigation priority." Complaints spurted from 77 in 1996 to 400 in 2000. In the uneasiness that followed the terrorist attacks of 2001, the Federal Aviation Administration felt constrained to warn airport security screeners against singling out passengers for extra inspections on the grounds of their accents. But far more complaints of this kind involve "English only" rules in companies and offices than accented English. Someone whose accent "interferes materially with job performance," the guidelines specify, won't have a winnable case. In medicine and academia, meanwhile, explicit accent standards have put down roots.

Until 1998, graduates of foreign medical schools took a written test to prove their English proficiency. Nearly all passed. Now, the U.S. agency that accredits them has added an oral test. A panel of American-born "standardized patients" scores it on a scale of comprehensibility. So far, 13 percent of foreign doctors have flunked, and overall applicant numbers have sunk. "People who don't have adequate spoken English skills," says Dr. Gerald Whelan, who supervises the testing, "know not to come." At universities, students have long made the alien accents of foreign teaching assistants a common grievance. In response, oral screening has arrived on campus. At the University of Michigan, among the first educational institutions to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

impose it in the mid-nineties, a dean told a campus paper, "We've removed those with serious problems." Dozens of universities have followed suit. And in business, managers have learned to avoid EEOC complaints by writing job descriptions inventively, and by making accent-reduction sessions available, reimbursable, highly recommended—and, of course, entirely voluntary.

Akshay Goel, a thirty-year-old Hindu computer engineer from New Delhi, lives in a bachelor's pad in Highland Park, New Jersey, works at a software company in Bridgewater, and drives a silver Mercedes. The directions Goel e-mailed me before I drove to his two-story, bleached-wood apartment complex one Saturday told me to "make a right onto the Cedar Lane," that I'd find his building "on the LHS," and that his place was on the first floor. It took me a second to catch on that LHS meant left-hand side. I went looking for him on the second floor, just in case; but, no, Goel is well aware that in America the first floor is on the ground.

His living room has a big-screen TV and a couple of CD towers. The glass-topped coffee table has five remotes on it, plus a cordless phone and a cell phone. As I arrive, the cordless rings. Goel listens patiently, and says, "I have some guests at home, could you call later?" In a minute, it rings again. Goel listens, and says, "I have some guests at home, could you call later?" His accent, not odd for Indians, is monotone; it takes getting used to. Placing the phone down, he calmly says, "Telemarketers." There's a cultural disconnect: I'd have been screaming.

Goel, dressed in shades of charcoal, sits on his charcoal couch to run through his linguistic history. His father was principal of a Delhi school, his mother a housewife, his brother a doctor, his sister an official at the ministry of fertilizers and chemicals. "Basically, an old family," he says. They spoke Hindi at home, but hardly anywhere else. "All my education, right from nursery school, was in English," Goel says. "It's normal. English is the official business language, as you would say. I'm completely bilingual."

Goel graduated from an engineering college in Andra Pradesh and, in 1992, enrolled in a master's program at Rutgers, moved to New Jersey, and stayed. Eight years later, his accent started to worry him.

"In a restaurant," he says, "especially those loud places, if I talk to somebody for the first time, they say, 'What?'"

Did that happen in India, too? "Well, probably."

What does he do about it? "I slow down."

So why fret over accent now?

"I dunno," Goel says. "I don't have that much problem, like, speaking English. I used to pronounce words with the stress being at different places—not the right places. Anywhere in the world there is sentiment against foreigners. That happens to everybody. That person is having a bad day, it could be just that. When people get used to the way you're talking, then they understand it." But in his superslick world of corporate presen-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tations—giving scripted speeches in front of computer graphics on flat-screened TVs—Goel can't afford bad days. An American speaking American English in a Delhi conference room will probably get by; an Indian speaking Indian English in a Manhattan conference room, he realizes, probably won't. "If I'm going to grow in the corporate world," says Goel, "I should speak the language everybody understands. You want to be the same. You never want to be different."

More than twenty years ago, in pre-Thatcherite Britain, a pedagogical response to the differences in the way people sound had a brief life. Industrial Language Training, as it was called, aimed to show native English managers how to decode the melodic signals in foreign speech—to learn, for instance, that raised pitch in the voice of an Indian employee signifies involvement, not overexcitement. The effort produced two BBC documentaries called *Crosstalk*, and a 1992 book, *Language and Discrimination.* Its inspiration came from the work of John Gumperz, now a linguistic anthropologist emeritus at the University of California. "Those in the majority are always translating impressions into judgments of ability and character," Gumperz told me recently. "The main problem is rhythm, tempo, the flow of speech. It's not a matter of correcting an individual's accent. The important thing is to learn to listen."

British government funding dried up for Industrial Language Training in the eighties; it has all but disappeared. In the U.S., apart from teaching the superficial niceties of expatriate etiquette, business and academia have taken little note of the inequalities in cultural crosstalk. At a few colleges, the English teachers responsible for screening foreigners are starting to wonder if lecture-hall confusion should be blamed on student ears as well as alien tongues. "How can we get the message across that communication is a two-way street?" Marilyn Miller of the University of Missouri asks in a newsletter for her fellow teachers. "How can we identify and handle complaints about poor communication that are really due to preconceptions or discrimination? How can we help undergraduates view communicating with those who speak with a different accent as a valuable skill to learn?"

She has no answers. For the untutored majority, the line where misunderstanding ends and bigotry begins remains fuzzy. Immigrants aggrieved at the way Americans react to their accents can spend years in court, but few would see the point. People who uproot and move don't like making waves in countries that welcome them. In America, Indians like Akshay Goel would rather reach for the skin-lightener. So, a while ago, he signed on with Sharon Glaser.

They make an intriguing pair. Both grew up saying *dem* and *doze* for *them* and *those;* if this were Delhi, she might be taking accent instruction from him. But this is Jersey, and it's Goel who visits Glaser once a week. She sublets a fake-pine-paneled office in a low building amid the malls of Somerset.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Having rolled up in his Mercedes after work one evening, Goel takes a seat at a table with a microphone on it. He faces a mirror, to observe his own lip movements. Glaser sits to his right, and they begin their eighteenth session of New Jersey-New Delhi mimicry.

Snippets:

She says: "I have seven days to save the cave." He says: "I ha-*vuh* se-*ven* days to sa-vuh the ca-*vuh*." She says: "Vacant, vehicle, vegetable." He says: "Vacant, *week*le, *ve*-get-ta-ble."

"Get those teeth into the lip," she says. Then: "A few *th* sounds. I *THOO-awt*, I *THOO-awt*. Wanna try that?"

"I *thot*. I *thot*," he says.

"California, antibiotic, ex-tra-*or*-din-ary," she says.

He says, "Cal-*ee*-fornia, ant-*eye*-biotic, *ikstrodnry*."

"That's fine," she says. "That's British."

He recites: Exaggeration. Anniversary. Multiplication. Representative. Louisiana. "How'd you say the state?" she says.

"*Loosiana*."

"Good."

He says, "Ter-*ror*-ism."

She says, "*Ter*-ror-ism."

"*Ter*-ror-ism, ter-*ror*-ism," he says.

This goes on for forty minutes, and then the lesson ends. Glaser gives Goel a homework assignment to record an extemporaneous tape: "Convince someone to take a trip to India, someone who refuses to go, okay?"

After he writes her a check and leaves, she shows me a few of the books she uses for exercises. One is called Pronouncing American English. "I used this kind of as an auxilarlary," Glaser says. I can't help it—I correct her. She giggles. "See. I never claim to have perfect diction. I never claim. It feels awkward for me, you know, being in this position of deeming what is proper and what is not proper, because who am I, after all?" Packing her tape recorder, Glaser adds: "Akshay sounds good. He didn't come to me sounding terrible and I turned him into that. Akshay started off pretty well."

Thanks to her tutelage, perhaps he will be turning fewer heads at the cotillions of high technology. But Akshay Goel is no flower girl and Sharon Glaser is no Professor Higgins; and in polyglot New Jersey, I'd hope that even Professor Higgins would eventually learn to listen.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On Never Ending with a Preposition

DAVID HAMILTON

An axe works mostly by its own sufficient
Force, on your aim much more dependent

Than on your arm. Select a grain in a log,
Place two blows as if they were twin brothers,
And without more thought, most open for the fire.
But willow sprouts in fields prove pedagogues

More difficult. You must learn to strike
Beneath the soil, where earth, rewoven all
Winter, supports the subtle shoot. How genial
Then your knowing cut, exactly quick

And gleaming like the air your axe glides through.
But hit it high, not that unusual,
And the willow stings inside your hand, then all
The way, your arm and eye, back out up in to.

David Hamilton, author of *Deep River: A Memoir of a Missouri Farm*, teaches at the University of Iowa and edits *The Iowa Review*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On Not Psychoanalyzing Virginia Woolf

PETER GAY

Of all modern novelists, Virginia Woolf has long been the one most susceptible to psychoanalytic prying. No wonder: the evidence she has left to posterity—her thousands of brilliant letters, her copious and revealing diaries, her posthumous autobiographical sketches—seems to invite the most uninhibited scrutiny. So she has been endlessly poked and prodded by interpreters hoping to explore the half-revealed secrets of her life as clues to her reticent, often elusive work. There seems to be much to explore: early sexual molestation by one, perhaps both, of her half brothers; an apparently sexless marriage; a passionate lesbian affair—what could be more tempting? Certainly her angst-ridden existence, with its virtually uninterrupted neurotic sufferings punctuated by stretches of psychosis, reads much like a psychiatrist's case history. Should the literary critic, faced with accomplished but not easily accessible fictions like *Mrs. Dalloway* or *To the Lighthouse,* forgo so promising an interpretative instrument as the Freudian dispensation?

There are, of course, numerous technical studies of Virginia Woolf's style, her symbolism, and her place in modernist literature that stay away from the couch. And there are monographs pairing her, at times rather oddly, with other writers, texts that smack of dissertations in comparative literature: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater, Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison. But among biographers—and there must be more than two dozen of them,

Peter Gay, Sterling Professor of History Emeritus at Yale University and Director of the Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library, is the author of *Freud: A Life for Our Time* and the editor of *The Freud Reader. Schnitzler's Century: The Making of Middle-Class Culture, 1815–1914* was published last fall. His most recent contribution to the SCHOLAR was *My German Question* (Autumn 1998).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in several languages—few have resisted making connections between Woolf's life and her work. Among the refuseniks, an unfashionable minority, are the late Sonya Rudikoff, whose elegant *Ancestral Houses: Virginia Woolf and the Aristocracy* came out in 1999, and Hermione Lee, whose admirable biography, *Virginia Woolf,* was first published in Britain in 1996.

Hermione Lee's book deserves close attention. It is by far the longest, and, in my judgment, by far the best biography we have of Virginia Woolf. Lee declines to psychoanalyze Woolf, and explains just why. She is fully aware that a few choice remarks of her subject's have become canonical and pop up in virtually every text that ventures to unriddle the mysteries of Woolf's life. If remarks had feelings, they would be drooping from exhaustion. "Why do you think people make such a fuss about marriage and copulation?" Woolf asked a close friend not long after her marriage. "Why do some of our friends change upon losing chastity? Possibly my great age makes it less of a catastrophe, but certainly I find the climax immensely exaggerated." Again, the insouciant paper she read to her friends in 1920, detailing her sexual muggings by her half brother George Duckworth, is enshrined in biographical lore.

What Hermione Lee does with this evidence—the common property of all commentators on Woolf—is to reflect on it calmly and astutely, and to share with her readers the views she has carved out for herself. Her proceedings remind me of modernist buildings, like the Pompidou Center in Paris, that display the skeleton of the construction, which is usually concealed. It turns out that, once placed into its context, the unlovely erotic material is less than reliable; it may seriously distort, or show little if anything about, Woolf's real-life experience. Our dependable information about her is far skimpier than most biographers had led us to believe. And that checkmates the excited interpreters who have drawn facile inferences about the relationship of her mental troubles to her novels.

We have ample and trustworthy proofs that Virginia Woolf would have applauded her prudent biographers—with her characteristic mixed feelings. She was surrounded by psychoanalysis most of her adult life. The Hogarth Press, which she founded with her husband, Leonard, in 1917, published Freud and other major psychoanalytic authors. Her brother Adrian was trained as an analyst. Her friends James and Alix Strachey, both psychoanalyzed by Freud, played key roles in bringing their analyst's ideas to a wider English public, and James's older brother, Lytton Strachey, to whom Virginia Woolf was devoted, was another Freud enthusiast. Even Leonard Woolf, though not uncritical, came to see humanity in largely Freudian terms. Virginia herself did not begin to absorb Freud's major texts until the 1930s, and she found his pessimism about human nature all too congenial. But what Freud had to say about aggression suited her far better than what he had to say about sexuality.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

If, then, Woolf vehemently rejected psychoanalysis, this attests mainly to her deeply felt wish not to be boxed in, typecast, labeled. She knew herself to be as changeable as English weather; she vibrated to impressions and luxuriated in stimuli far beyond normal sensitivity. But she did not want to be identified as a *case.* She wished to be known, first and last, as a writer. Though the Woolfs consulted a dozen specialists in the course of her sufferings, the notion of being subjected to a formal psychoanalysis would have been unthinkable to her. Nor did her husband press her; she was too vulnerable, too much exposed to unanalyzable manic-depressive episodes, to be put safely on the couch.

Should we try to do so? Most attempts have been calamitous. Consider Louise De Salvo's *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work,* published in 1989. This study may be at the extreme end of those texts busy discovering traces of the life in the work, but it has the virtue of not mincing words. "Virginia Woolf was a sexually abused child; she was an incest survivor"—thus the opening paragraph in its entirety. The author quickly generalizes this dramatic finding: "Virginia Stephen was raised in a household in which incest, sexual violence, and abusive behavior were a common, rather than a singular or rare occurrence; a family in which there is evidence that virtually all were involved in either incest or violence or both, a family in which each parent had lived through childhood trauma." The implications are "frightening," with the family's children "at supreme risk and adversely affected for a lifetime." A respectable, hardworking, and distinguished Victorian family stands exposed as a nest of vipers that made Virginia Woolf the nervous wreck she became.

Fortunately, De Salvo carries out the threat of her subtitle only in fragmentary bits and pieces. She trawls through Woolf's major fictions and fishes up the suspicious way they deal with their characters' peculiar adolescence. There is nothing about Woolf's novels as novels, as literary achievements that may have derived their unmistakable individuality from sources other than domestic rape and incest—even if such incidents were as vicious and traumatic as De Salvo seems to believe. The fictions she examines take on the appearance of direct transcriptions of Woolf's appalling life at home. But even if this were true and this were all, it would hardly justify reading Woolf's work as a barely disguised clinical report.

And speaking of clinical reports: what of her manic-depressive episodes? A little flatfootedly, but at least more realistically than De Salvo, Peter Dally, in *Virginia Woolf: The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1999), has tried to deal with them, explaining her work not through rape but through a disease with unmistakable genetic roots. Hermione Lee sturdily refuses to imprison her subject in a diagnostic cage. In a long chapter, "Madness," she states that Virginia Woolf's clinical picture "conforms to the profile of what is called manic-depressive illness." With the aid of Woolf's diary and correspondence, supported by Leonard Woolf's extensive observations in his autobiography,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

one can chart the oft-repeated sequence of her moods, which fluctuated from aggressive elation to suicidal depression. And it is known that this illness is handed down through the generations. It follows that whatever Woolf's half brothers may have done to her, the mental histories of her father and grandfather are of considerably greater clinical interest—always assuming that beyond filling certain gaps in the life of Virginia Woolf, this diagnosis has any light to shed on what has made her immortal.

These conundrums raise two important intertwined issues. Biographers need to have solid facts before they dare construct persuasive accounts of their subjects' intimate lives. And even when they have those facts, they must still recognize that a psychoanalytic interpretation remains highly problematic. The hazard of analyzing makers of fictions is obvious: a reductionism that causally links the subject's inner life to the subject's published work then becomes nothing better than a sublimated symptom. Hermione Lee's biography is one long warning against such vulgarity.

But despite all my admiration for Lee's Virginia Woolf, I do find something to be said for the other side. With my strong commitment to psychoanalysis as an auxiliary discipline in aid of research and interpretation, it could hardly be otherwise. Reductionism is by no means an obligatory effect of psychoanalytic biographies. As Freud famously put it in his essay on Leonardo da Vinci, whom he idealized, "There is no one so great that it would be a disgrace for him to be subject to the laws that govern normal and pathological activity with equal severity." Even Leonardo was only human—and so was Virginia Woolf. But Freud did not believe for a moment that an analytic understanding of Leonardo's childhood explained his genius or devalued his accomplishments. In the late 1920s, writing on Dostoyevsky (a figure for whose psychological acuity Freud had considerable regard), he counseled modesty in a sentence quite as famous: "Unfortunately, before the problem of the creative artist, analysis must lay down its arms." In short, psychoanalytic approaches to biography are simply part of a literary interpreter's armamentarium in trying to compose as full, as profound, a portrait of the artist as it is humanly possible to draw.

The psychoanalytic attention Virginia Woolf has garnered is not necessarily a trivial pursuit or an impudent invasion of privacy. She said herself that "for the moderns," the "point of interest lies very likely in the dark places of psychology." She has also told us that her family inspired some of her imaginative flights and certain traits of her fictional characters. Her life invaded her work—who can doubt it? She never did. In mid-career, in her forties, writing about her parents, she told her diary: "I was obsessed by them both unhealthily; and writing of them was a necessary act." True, she used them more than they used her. But the tie is real enough, and may be pursued with profit—as long as we remember that neurosis causes artistic

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

failure as often as it produces important creations. We know there are millions of manic-depressives in the world, but few, if any, have ever reached Virginia Woolf's artistic heights.

Certainly Woolf's husband, Leonard, who hovered over her with anxious and affectionate solicitude for thirty years, thought the link was only too palpable. "I am quite sure," he wrote, "that Virginia's genius was closely connected with what manifested itself as mental instability and insanity. The creative imagination in her novels, her ability to 'leave the ground' in conversation, and the voluble delusions of the breakdowns all came from the same place in her mind." He may have been right. Even though a work of art or literature should be allowed to stand, autonomous, on its own merits, its origins in the maker's psyche are never irrelevant to a full appraisal. The plaint of an unidentified speaker in Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts,* hints that she was ready to keep the question open: "But why always drag in sex?" We might as well admit it: where there is sex, there is Freud.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Prayer

EDGAR KOERNER

Yes, let this feeling
settle upon me, softly
as a slow, windless snowfall,
gently as a parent's gaze
on a sleeping child,

this feeling
I've had once before,
as I woke from a dream
I could not remember,

a feeling that
everything has been

bestowed:
low, on the radio,
the Schubert trio's slow movement,
blending into, lending form to
the deepening dusk;
the plants standing tall
in the *cachepot*, touched,
even in half-light,
with so many greens;
Eileen, on the couch,
deep in a mystery, her hand
brushing hair back
from her face, her hair—look!—
falling again . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This feeling itself,
I know, is bestowed,
a gift as pure and unsought
as pollen.

A blessing? A grace?
No, turn from naming—
defining dilutes. Just

open instead, let in
the cello, now wending its way,
its solo meander
slowly ascending, its path
too perfect for destination.

All here is given, all
bestowed. Just let me
open, let me receive.

Edgar Koerner, a retired investment banker, is Chairman of the Board of the Children's Aid Society of New York. His poems have appeared in *The Southern Review, Judaism, Poetry East,* and other magazines.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In the Gallery

PATRICIA HOOPER

Another Dutch landscape—
this one a low plain, sea water
seeping through the grass.

And the flat sky behind it—indigo—but first
the mahogany-red farmhouse,
the windmill's wings turning

through mist in the gold light.
Didn't you tell me
you cut across wet fields

on the way to your grandmother's?
There's the tidy path, there's the gnarled
wind-hammered tree

and the place someone has walked
over bent weeds. Oh, why do I
add you to everything

even here? Isn't what's left enough?

Patricia Hooper's poems have appeared recently in *Poetry* and *The Atlantic Monthly*. Her work has been published several times in the SCHOLAR.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Neckties

DANIEL HARRIS

Although loose cravats became popular in Europe only during the seventeenth century, we have worn things around our necks for millennia, from cowls to feather boas, from diamond chokers to ruffled flea-catchers. Ancient Chinese civilizations believed that the Adam's apple was the source of a man's virility and that his neck therefore needed to be swaddled up in thick scarves in order to safeguard his vital energies, much as other cultures believed that a man's testicles needed to be protected by special belts, cups, and codpieces that helped deflect potentially emasculating blows. Even cats and dogs attempt to hide their necks from predators, hunkering down so that their shoulders and trapezius muscles shield exposed arteries easily severed by snapping teeth or sharp claws. Throat-baring among mammals suggests either submission or arousal, the sexual preening that occurs during mating rituals, when most creatures drop their guard and display their necks to their fullest advantage, heedless of the consequences of placing throbbing jugulars in full view of other hungry carnivores. While women wear décolleté at elegant dinner parties, flaunting the swanlike vulnerability of their necks and collar bones, businessmen wear ties partly to cover up the so-called neck dimple, the soft, easily punctured area of flesh beneath the Adam's apple, which executives, perhaps in response to Paleolithic memories of pitched battles waged out on the savannas, take great pains to hide. Perhaps they unconsciously believe that their knots provide armor against the cutthroat tactics of competitors who revert to jungle warfare around the conference table, threatening sur-

Daniel Harris is the author of *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture; Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism;* and *A Memoir of No One in Particular,* published this spring by Basic Books. His most recent contribution to the SCHOLAR was "Coolness" (Autumn 1999).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

prise tracheotomies on colleagues who inadvertently stick their necks out while jockeying for power.

The tie is the aesthetic Id of the corporate executive, the repository of all of the fabrics and designs that no man in his right mind would otherwise be caught dead in—the plaids, paisleys, polka dots, checks, and gaudy floral motifs swarming with butterflies and bumblebees that only women have the license to wear in the office world. This profusion of colors and patterns is a direct consequence of the extreme repression of the rest of business attire, which thwarts men's aesthetic impulses at every turn, confining them to a thin strip of silk on which the frustrated male imagination runs riot, released like a maniac from the prison of pinstripes, herringbone tweeds, worsted wool flannels, and double-breasted blazers.

The decolorization of the corporate male is partly the result of a radical shift in the meaning of bright color that occurred during the nineteenth century, when the Industrial Revolution made dyes that were once prohibitively expensive available to the proletariat. When pigments were laboriously produced by grinding minerals, boiling gums and resins, and oxidizing lead in damp pits, only the well-to-do could afford shocking-pink farthingales and slashed doublets in ultramarines, arsenic greens, and acid yellows, while peasants were forced to make do with drab khakis and lackluster browns. With the invention of mechanically produced dyes, vivid hues lost their aristocratic associations and became intimately linked to the vulgarity of the lower classes, who celebrated their emancipation from muddy colors by decking themselves out in blindingly garish tints. This indiscriminate love of flashy clothing inspired an aesthetic backlash among the male elite, who naturally toned down the colors of their own gorgeously patterned wardrobes and instead donned "tasteful" fabrics in ministerial blacks and conventual grays. Today's monochromatic businessman still lives in the state of extreme color deprivation that bleached the character out of elegant clothing when bourgeois men sought to distinguish their outfits from the candy-colored fabrics preferred by the urban poor, who delighted in the newfound sensuality of their wardrobes, proudly displaying their rainbow-hued glad rags along with their pomaded hair and loud colognes. The tie remained as the one splash of frivolity in the midst of the snobbish color moratorium that affluent people imposed on the luridly playful styles of the past.

The nineteenth century not only transformed the tie into a somewhat melancholy memento mori for a lost Golden Age of chromatic permissiveness but invested it with unsavory symbolic associations with imprisonment and restraint, with being tethered to monotonous desk jobs in unventilated spaces devoid of privacy. As men's suit jackets became more unbuttoned and exposed a larger section of the starched white shirt, the tie gradually lengthened to fill in this new vacuum until it assumed its contemporary form—that of a slender noose that dangles to a man's waist like

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the reins of a horse's bridle, a resemblance seen in the name of the tie's most common knot, the four-in-hand, which refers to the leather leads of a nineteenth-century carriage. As an exercise in neck binding, like the Chinese art of foot binding, the tie has become one of the counterculture's primary emblems of enslavement to meaningless labor, of subordination to The Man, the Establishment that keeps us shackled to our workstations, gagged and muzzled by a strangling silk cord wound tightly around one of the most defenseless parts of our bodies.

The burden the tie bears of colorizing the wan office worker and its inescapable association with the gallows, with the dreaded "hempen necktie," are among the primary reasons why a revolution is occurring in the basic vocabulary of its imagery. Increasingly, men are turning an article of clothing virtually synonymous with conformity into a vehicle for humor and self-assertion, decorating their cloth chains with bespectacled flamingos, dentists pulling teeth, Ping-Pong paddles, flying toilets, foreshortened hippos, and people swinging on bungee cords. This ideologically problematic accessory is turning against itself, becoming a burlesque of its own staidness, the butt of an aesthetic joke, as in T-shirts stenciled with full suit jackets or in countless novelty ties that show X-rays of a man's chest, Dali's melting clocks, Dr. Seuss's Cat in the Hat, and broken eggs trickling down trompe l'oeil shirt fronts. A new spirit of irreverence is subverting the banal abstractions of floating trapezoids and navy blue polka dots, now giving way to splattered tomatoes or ragged brush strokes of paint composed of Ben Day dots à la Roy Lichtenstein—images that beckon the viewer with a sly wink, enlisting him as a fellow sans-cravatist in the war against the standardization of men's attire.

The dissonant aesthetic of the tie also derives from the role that women and children play in its selection. It has become something of a visual non sequitur within the context of men's outfits, because, as one of the cliché gifts for Father's Day and anniversaries, it reflects the sensibility of people who are unfamiliar with the world in which it is worn, who don't belong there and hence cannot be expected to choose patterns that blend seamlessly into the institutional setting. Ties often embody the aesthetic of the man's family, whose members see him not as an unscrupulous brute shaking his fist at his sobbing secretary and scrambling for power in the boardroom, but as a big sweet lug, a lovable teddy bear who dandles his children on his knees and gives his wife a peck on the lips before departing with his newspaper for the commuter train. Ties thus represent an invasion of domesticity into the sterile office park. Designs composed of toy drums, tricycles, melting ice cream cones, Mylar balloons shaped like hearts, and stains of bright red lipstick represent an act of smuggling, an illegal transport of visual contraband across the corporate threshold. Men wear these reminders of privacy in order to bridge the widening rift between their

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

home lives and their careers, as well as to humanize their own image by presenting to others a view of themselves that may directly contradict the view held by colleagues who have watched them ruthlessly fire subordinates, seduce young interns, lay off thousands during hostile takeovers, and destroy the economies of Third World nations.

Our revenge against this highly symbolic and uncomfortable accessory appears again in another change in its imagery, which once alluded to the recreational activities of an imaginary leisure class, a moneyed aristocracy whose ties were embroidered with duck decoys, hunting dogs, horses, sailboats, anchors, and tiny figures whacking balls with polo sticks. In the last twenty years, there has been a distinct lowbrowing of the tie's constituent elements, which are no longer drawn exclusively from the world of WASP kitsch, from regattas and tennis matches, golf courses and stables for thoroughbreds, but now come also from the mundane, anti-heroic world of our daily lives: license plates, beer bottles, toothbrushes, soup cans, football jerseys, dump trucks, and woodworking tools. Menswear companies are responding to a new populist aesthetic and eschewing the archaic status symbols of sturdy New Englanders who carry on such quaint, old-world traditions as fox hunts, yachting, and croquet—polite, patrician pastimes that have given way to hipper sports like scuba diving, rock climbing, and surfboarding.

Traditional ties are not only nostalgic, they are often medieval, as can be seen in another major strand of imagery: heraldic symbols—fleurs-de-lis, escutcheons, rampant lions, griffons, and chevrons. While feudal insignia will probably never be completely eliminated from the tie, having been absorbed into the language of ornament, changes in our economy are finally catching up with the chivalric world of King Arthur, which businessmen bear on their breasts like aged paladins, teleconferencing Knights of the Round Table who clash on the battlefield of the liquid lunch. Instead of crossed lances, visored helmets, and bars sinister, a new, more modern form of blazonry is appearing, one that belatedly reflects the displacement of the fiefdom by the multinational cartel: corporate logos and trademarks—"swoosh" symbols, Mickey Mouses, tiny Harley Davidsons, Pillsbury doughboys, M&M's, CKs, and the linked Gs of Gucci. Companies are appropriating the prestige of ancient wealth and illustrious pedigree by installing their own escutcheons on the same strip of fading tapestry as the banners and armorial bearings of milords and miladies lost in the mists of Camelot.

Heraldic symbols take second place only to images of fertility—cornucopias of fruits and vegetables or vines of lush flowers that wind around the tie as though it were a trellis. Even in the lifeless corporate world, where the sturdiest of house plants ultimately shrivel and die, the theme of Dionysian fecundity remains a central motif of men's outfits, which hark back to ancient celebrations of the harvest, to fears of famine and drought—catas-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

trophes that businessmen unconsciously ward off with talismans representing an idealized world of tropical abundance. Recently, however, vegetal themes are giving way to a new kind of fecundity that directly alludes to the iconographic roots of ornament in the exuberance of nature: the exuberance of the store shelf and the shopping mall, whose products spill down the steep chute of the tie much as apples, celery stalks, and pomegranates spill out of the traditional horn of plenty. Thickets of cell phones, laptop computers, miniature SUVs, CD-ROMs, and boom boxes now grow on ties in the same dense, intricate patterns as acanthus leaves and olive vines. Perhaps even the superstitious purpose of this new kind of bullish fertility is the same as that of images of bumper crops of corn and heaps of succulent grapes: rather than warding off natural disasters, the voluptuous clusters of electronic products proliferating on ties provide a good-luck charm against recession, inflation, and market volatility, against corporate drought—a calamity far more frightening to an environmentally insensitive culture than food shortages and depleted ozone layers.

Historically, ornament has always derived much of its aesthetic appeal from the instability of forms and the magic of transformation, of vines that grow into Gorgons' heads that sprout stylized volutes, which in turn metamorphose into leaping dolphins who pull chariots driven by a smirking Bacchus and his tipsy entourage. The modern tie also alludes to this Ovidian obsession with change. It is frequently based on a visual pun in which hundreds of dancing salsa bottles, martini glasses in miniskirts, ladybugs with mustaches, or iridescent dragonflies in top hats and cummerbunds are printed so close together that they fade into abstraction and are voided of their representational content, becoming as pictorially neutral as parallelograms floating on fields of lapis lazuli and scalene triangles laid cheek by jowl with yellow lozenges and crimson stars. The pedestrian debris scattered like litter on the contemporary tie is often in disguise, and is meant to be viewed from a very specific vantage point that ensures that those bunny rabbits licking Popsicle sticks or those kitty cats wearing monocles will never emerge from their tight grid of interlocking shapes to become a focus of attention in their own right.

Ties are not intended to be examined at close range, but only at the safe distance sanctioned by office etiquette, which discourages people from invading their colleagues' space and sticking their noses within inches of a man's chest in order to get a clearer view of images that are—quite deliberately—teasingly imprecise. Such puns serve to heighten curiosity by presenting forms that remain illegible until the viewer achieves a proximity that professionalism itself forbids, thus beckoning us to step over the line, grab the tie by its tongue, and read the fine print of an aesthetic contract that is always somewhat out of focus, that reveals itself only in stages—a bold brick pattern becoming a wall of scowling mug shots, or a set of polka dots a sea of cross-eyed smiley faces obscenely licking their chops. Not only does this

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

optical trick subtly enhance a man's visual appeal by making him the object of an extremely mild form of frustrated inquisitiveness, but it also reflects the politics of the staid business environment in which the white-collar worker often uses his tie to express mockery and irreverence, a sense of maladjustment, a longing to be someone else, to escape from the airless cell of his beige cubicle into a land of fantasy, infantilism, and color. The tie is always a private joke, never a public one; it is a secret act of cowardly rebellion, never a full-scale insurrection. The corporate environment remains unchallenged by designs whose defanged satire and adolescent silliness can seldom be seen by the audience they hold in contempt.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Tramp of a Fly's Footstep

or, The Shriek, Rattle, and Roar of a Victorian Sound Track

JOHN M. PICKER

In an 1827 article titled "Experiments on Audition," Charles Wheatstone, the King's College physics professor and co-signer of the 1837 patent on the electric telegraph, described with little fanfare a rudimentary, non-electric amplifier of faint sounds that he dubbed a "microphone." Just over a half-century later, in 1878, a Kentucky music professor named David Hughes revived Wheatstone's term for his own invention of the carbon microphone, the forerunner of modern ones. As W. H. Preece, the electrician for the British Post Office, put it at the time in public lectures, Hughes's device opened up new areas of acoustic inquiry: "The microphone is an instrument which acts towards the ear as the microscope does to the eye. It will render evident to us sounds that are otherwise absolutely inaudible. I have heard myself the tramp of a little fly across a box with a tread almost as loud as that of a horse across a wooden bridge. There was a remarkable sound that accompanied the tramp of Mr. Fly, and a facetious friend of mine told me he thought the noise was occasioned by the neighing of the proboscis of the fly."

Meanwhile, George Eliot, writing in the voice of the cynic Theophrastus Such, was more restrained about what she called the "microphone which detects the cadence of the fly's foot on the ceiling, and may be expected presently to discriminate the noises of our various follies as they soliloquise or converse in our brains." The tread of a fly was just the starting point for a writer in *The Spectator* who anticipated that it now would be possible "to

John M. Picker, Assistant Professor of English at Harvard, teaches Victorian literature. This essay is adapted from *The Victorian Soundscape,* forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hear the sap rise in the tree; to hear it rushing against small obstacles to its rise, as a brook rushes against the stones in its path; to hear the bee suck honey from the flower; to hear the rush of the blood through the smallest of blood-vessels, and the increase of that rush due to the slightest inflammatory action." Such were the more imaginative uses for new powers of listening that would attend to "the roar on the other side of silence," as Eliot famously had written in *Middlemarch* (1871–72). Or, as Preece put it in his 1878 lectures, it now could be confirmed that "every one's body . . . is alive with sound."

Five years later, in 1883, in what is now Indonesia but was then the colonial domain of the Dutch East India Company, the eruption on the volcanic island of Krakatoa caused one of the greatest natural disasters to date and created the loudest sounds ever documented. In their official report, members of the Royal Society noted that the noise of the August eruption traveled nearly three thousand miles to Rodriguez Island in the Indian Ocean, where the Chief of Police recorded that "several times during the night of the 26th-27th reports were heard coming from the eastward, like the distant roars of heavy guns." A journalist at the time provided a more immediate analogy: if a resident of Philadelphia "should earnestly insist upon his having heard an explosion in San Francisco, *three thousand miles away,* he would receive a pitying smile, and his listener would silently walk away." With its booming sound effects and the months of dazzling English sunsets that resulted from its scattered debris, Krakatoa eventually surfaced in the writings of Tennyson, Hopkins, Swinburne, Ruskin, and even the likes of R. M. Ballantyne, who immortalized the noise and volcano in his 1889 novel *Blown to Bits:* "It is no figure of speech to say that the world heard that crash. Hundreds, ay, thousands of miles did the sound of the mighty upheaval pass over land and sea to startle the nations of the earth." It is worth pausing to note the imperial overtones of this event: the empire strikes back here with a violence that is distinctly aural.

From the tramp of a fly's footstep to the roar of a volcanic blast, to begin to recuperate the Victorian soundscape is to realize just how vast it really was. The juxtaposition of technological developments and natural forces as wildly different as the microphone and Krakatoa suggests at the outset that this was a period of unprecedented amplification, unheard-of loudness. It was, to use Preece's words, an age "alive with sound": alive with the screech and roar of the railway and the clang of industry, with the babble, bustle, and music of city streets, with the crackle and squawk of acoustic vibrations on wires and wax—yet alive as well with the performances of the literary voices that struggled to be heard above or through all of this. Nearly three-quarters of a century after Krakatoa, John Cage entered an anechoic chamber, where he heard his heart beat and his blood flow, prompting his remark that "there is no such thing as silence" and his notorious "silent piece," *4′33″*, in which a pianist sits onstage without playing). As for Cage, so for the Victori-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ans: George Eliot lived to see her literary metaphor of an idealized receptive sensibility become a literal condition of physical existence. As the growing body of recent scholarship on nineteenth-century photography, optics, and visual culture suggests, the gaze acquired a new degree of importance in this period, but the era also experienced a rise in close listening. In more ways than one, that is, Victorians were hearing things.

To revive a term that they themselves first gave wide currency, theirs was an age of "auscultation," not only in the medical sense initiated by the stethoscope (invented in 1819) and perfected by the microphone, of amplifying the sounds of the heart, lungs, and other organs in order to diagnose illness more accurately, but also in the sense of careful listening to a world at large—and in flux. If Victorian doctors were the first to treat their patients with sophisticated methods of auscultation, Victorian writers and artists were the first to diagnose their culture with such attentive soundings. Charles Dickens hinted at as much through the words of the stonemason "Stony" Durdles, who describes his unusual hearing abilities to the choirmaster and possible murderer John Jasper in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood,* published in 1870:

> "Now, look'ee here. You pitch your note, don't you, Mr. Jasper?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> "So I sound for mine. I take my hammer, and I tap . . . I tap, tap, tap. Solid! I go on tapping. Solid still! Tap again. Hallao! Hollow! Tap again, persevering. Solid in hollow! Tap, tap, tap, to try it better. Solid in hollow; and inside solid, hollow again! There you are! Old 'un crumbled away in stone coffin, in vault!"
>
> "Astonishing!"

Such was the power of nineteenth-century hearing that for Stony Durdles, telegraph-like taps of auscultation led to a corpse: appropriately enough, as it turned out, for this discovery occurred in the story its author died writing. Exhausted from literary production, but especially from his frantically paced lecture tours, where thousands thronged to hear the voice of the Inimitable, Dickens at the end of his career found himself not only the towering practitioner of Victorian close listening, but also its greatest victim. A decade before the debut of the phonograph, Dickens already had used his public reading tours to perfect and maintain a technology of oral presence. The tours reduced him to a reproducing speech machine, as his perpetual need to repeat himself fed and appeared to sanction his audiences' incessant desire to hear the same old hits again and again—primarily *A Christmas Carol,* which, in its Magoo, Muppet, and Patrick Stewart versions, returns each year still, to haunt and bless us, every one.

Yet before Victoria ascended the throne, even before *Pickwick Papers* began appearing in monthly parts in 1836, Dickens and his contemporaries found

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

themselves the inheritors of the Romantics' preoccupation with the sublime force of the music and quiet of nature. One only has to think of the frequency of the metaphor of the Aeolian harp in Romantic poetry to recognize the centrality of natural sound to the Lake Poets. "There are sounds more sublime than any sight *can* be," Coleridge wrote in *The Friend,* while Wordsworth equated the workings of the ear with those of the eye in his long poem from 1828, "On the Power of Sound." The Romantic poets' preference for the rough music of nature over the refined performances of concert halls and salons was echoed by Charles Lamb in his "Chapter on Ears" (1821), later collected in his *Essays of Elia.* "I have no ear," Lamb claimed as Elia, adding that he had "sat through an Italian Opera, till, for sheer pain, and inexplicable anguish," he had "rushed out into the noisiest places of the crowded streets" to console himself with sounds he "was not obliged to follow, and get rid of the distracting torment of endless, fruitless, barren attention!" Only outside, on the streets, could he take "refuge in the unpretending assemblage of honest, common-life sounds." By his twenty-sixth birthday, Dickens owned not just one but two well-thumbed copies of the works of, in his words, "the original, kind-hearted, veritable Elia." It was Lamb's step across the threshold from the opera house into the hubbub of London street life, the bustle that Elia's ear interpreted as a "paradise," that helped set the precedent for Dickens and his fellow urban journalists to attend to and begin to archive the new "common-life" sounds of the Victorian city.

Several publications by scientifically inclined figures in the 1820s and early 1830s sounded the first hints of a larger cultural shift toward close listening. Among his many other investigations, Wheatstone, for example, beginning in 1823, published a series of eclectic but influential aurally centered articles with such titles as "New Experiments in Sound." By that time, William Hyde Wollaston—physicist, chemist, discoverer of palladium and rhodium, and inventor of the *camera lucida*—had made, in an article titled "On Sounds Inaudible by Certain Ears" (1820), the earliest claim for the relative receptivity of ears to high-pitched frequencies. One story has it that Wollaston, attempting to ascertain whether some people could hear high pitches that others could not, played on pipes while hiding behind the stacks in Sir Henry Bunbury's library and watched to see which readers jumped or winced at certain high notes. Through such eccentric methods, Wollaston explored "the other side of silence" a half-century before George Eliot invoked the ability of "hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat" as a metaphor for her doctrine of sympathy in *Middlemarch* and lamented that "the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity."

Among the most compassionate of the early-nineteenth-century explorers of the sonic realm was William Wright, the self-proclaimed "surgeon aurist extraordinary" to nobility, from Queen Charlotte to the Duke of Wellington, whom he outlived. Wright dedicated an early work to Wellington and clearly felt sympathy for the man whose hearing in his left ear,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Wright disclosed after the duke's death in 1852, had first been damaged by gunfire, and then completely lost after an earlier doctor's botched treatment. To that noisy stanza from Tennyson's ode (which, in 1890, the Laureate himself recorded by shouting into a phonograph), Wright's admission of the duke's hearing loss lends an unintended irony:

> Where shall we lay the man whom we deplore?
> Here, in streaming London's central roar.
> Let the sound of those he wrought for,
> And the feet of those he fought for,
> Echo round his bones forevermore.

This is a eulogistic roar and echo, after all, which the military hero, even had he been alive, would have only half heard. Beginning in 1817 with *An Essay on the Human Ear,* Wright published a number of books on the physiology of hearing and treatments for deafness, but his work is dominated by outrage at those, like Wellington's earlier doctor, who advocated caustics, mercurials, "acoustic drops," and other absurd remedies. The poet Thomas Hood sent up the entire enterprise of "curing" deafness in "A Tale of a Trumpet" (1841), his comic poem about a peddler's sale of a speaking trumpet (the amplifying predecessor to Hughes's microphone), which happens to be possessed with the power to let users eavesdrop on whispered rumors and hushed-up scandals. Hoping to undo her deafness, an old woman buys it and delights in suddenly hearing all the gossip in the neighborhood. After dutifully spreading everyone else's secrets, she gets her comeuppance when the town condemns her as a witch and drowns her. Then, as now, there was much money and risk to be hazarded in schemes designed to clear the impaired or indifferent ear; as Hood put it, "But think what thousands and thousands of pounds / We pay for nothing but hearing sounds." Surgeon aurist Wright's critiques, however, were more explicit and severe. As late as 1858 (seven years after the Great Exhibition, that defining display of advances in industry, science, and commerce during Victoria's reign), in a long digression in his *Fishes and Fishing: Artificial Breeding of Fish, Anatomy of Their Senses, Their Loves, Passions, and Intellects,* Wright paused once more to castigate "most of the regular professors of aural surgery," whose methods proved "not only perfectly *useless,* but *highly injurious,* and *too often fatal.*"

Progress came slowly, but in their scientific and technological discoveries, Victorians went a long way toward dispelling the mysteries of hearing and sound. They sought to transform what Romantics had conceived as a sublime poetic *experience* into a quantifiable, containable, and ultimately marketable *object* or *thing,* a sonic commodity for that most conspicuous legacy of Victorianism, the modern middle-class consumer. This period

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gave rise, after all, to the electric telegraph and the microphone, the telephone and the phonograph, technical apparatuses such as Hermann von Helmholtz's vowel resonators and John Tyndall's singing flames, and specialized shorthand systems like Isaac Pitman's phonography and Alexander Melville Bell's visible speech, all of these, in one form or another, means to make manifest and to manipulate formerly intangible, unruly vibrations. The pivotal figure in the conquest of sound was the physiologist Helmholtz, who crafted the bridge between Romantic and Victorian aural sensibilities, between the lyric power of the Aeolian harp and the electric current of the telephone, and was a major influence on both George Eliot and her common-law husband George Henry Lewes, who considered Helmholtz's greatness on a par with that of Shakespeare, Bacon, and Newton. Helmholtz's special force lay in his willingness to preserve the allure of sound waves—in one of his favorite images, their elusiveness and mystery evoked those of far-off ocean waves he surveyed from a high cliff—even while he dissected their pitches and harmonics like so many laboratory specimens.

In a fortuitous misunderstanding that became a triumph of ignorance, Alexander Graham Bell—the son of Alexander Melville Bell, and the inventor of the telephone—convinced himself, after mistranslating Helmholtz's *On the Sensations of Tone* from the German, that Helmholtz had already concluded that vowel sounds could be electrically transmitted over wires. "If I had been able to read German, I might never have begun my experiments in electricity," Bell remarked years later. Helmholtz's impact on the work of George Eliot is evident not only in the sympathetic registers of *Middlemarch,* but especially in the astonishing vocal range of *Daniel Deronda.* Like Bell's telephone, the other famous breakthrough of 1876 that resulted from an idiosyncratic reading of Helmholtz, *Daniel Deronda* portends new paradigms of "separateness with communication" both internationally and at home. Given this odd analogy, no wonder that Eliot, upon first trying a telephone in 1878, reportedly said, "It is very wonderful, very useful. What marvelous inventions you Americans have!" Although science and technology seemed to lay open the workings of sound, music, and voice right under their ears, Victorian writers found in these new truths a basis for wonder, inspiration, and even romance, and they also found new questions to ask as they positioned these discoveries in their increasingly decadent, uncanny world.

Consider, at this point, the case of Dickens. With a renewed attention to sound, a seemingly obscure passage in his relatively early novel *Dombey and Son* (1846–48) becomes a clue to a new way of understanding not just this work, but also its author's career as having a particular kind of acoustic significance. The narrator describes the socially mobile Sir Barnet Skettles as "like a sound in air, the vibration of which, according to the speculation of an ingenious modern philosopher, may go travelling for ever through

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the interminable fields of space." This "ingenious modern philosopher" turns out to be Charles Babbage, a good friend of Dickens, and the inventor of the Difference Engine, the calculating machine considered the first computer. Dickens is referring to the ninth chapter of Babbage's *The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise: A Fragment* (1837), entitled "On the Permanent Impression of Our Words and Actions on the Globe We Inhabit." This chapter made quite an impression on Dickens. He was still quoting from it more than a decade later.

Though technically a Victorian work, the *Ninth Bridgewater Treatise* lives up to its Romantic subtitle: it is suggestive rather than prescriptive, an essayistic counterpart to *Don Juan* and *The Triumph of Life,* the far better-known fragmentary poems of Byron and Shelley, Babbage's contemporaries by birth. But it is, more than this, a book that influenced the way Dickens and *his* contemporaries conceived of sound and voice. In his ninth chapter, Babbage, drawing in part on the work of Wollaston, claims that pulses of air from the voice, even after they become inaudible to human ears, remain in one form or another permanently etched on the earth's atmosphere. In his central analogy, Babbage compares the voices etched on air to words printed on a page:

> Thus considered, what a strange chaos is this atmosphere we breathe! Every atom, impressed with good and with ill, retains at once the motions which philosophers and sages have imparted to it, mixed and combined in ten thousand ways with all that is worthless and base. The air itself is one vast library, on whose pages are forever written all that man has said or woman whispered. There, in their mutable but unerring characters, mixed with the earliest, as well as with the latest sighs of mortality, stand for ever recorded, vows unredeemed, promises unfulfilled, perpetuating in the united movements of each particle, the testimony of man's changeful will.

For Babbage, it is not only the air that acts as a kind of giant phonograph, recording voices that, he concedes, only God possesses the knowledge to replay. The ocean waves also keep records of all vibrations that pass over them: "the waters, and the more solid materials of the globe, bear equally enduring testimony of the acts we have committed."

The claims that Babbage's chapter made for sound and voice gave Dickens—who, following low sales of *Martin Chuzzlewit,* several shorter and less impressive literary projects, and a failed attempt to run a newspaper, faced the period of perhaps greatest self-doubt and anxiety in his career—a new way to conceptualize his role as writer and performer of his work. Not just *Dombey and Son* but also Dickens's career from this juncture on became an echo chamber for Babbage's ideas about the permanence of voice, and these ideas are embodied in little Paul Dombey, the frail, unearthly son of the title who famously is "*born, to die,*" as Dickens put it in his notes to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

novel. In a story that roars with the tumult of rail and sea, little Paul's insistent question to his sister Florence—"The sea, Floy, what is it that it keeps on saying?"—is the sign that he is Dickens's most engaged listener, a receptive medium for the sound waves that flow beyond the reach of others' hearing. When the novel first appeared, a popular duet capitalized on Paul's aural inclinations; in "What Are the Wild Waves Saying?" a forgotten Victorian songwriter (J. E. Carpenter) attempted to interpret the obscure sounds, with predictably tedious results, as Paul and Florence together sing, "The voice of the great Creator / Dwells in that mighty tone!" Despite what this composer would have readers think, the waves remain indistinct and unintelligible. In the context of the earnest scientific speculations of Babbage, however, little Paul's wonder at what the waves were always saying makes more sense, for according to the *Ninth Bridgewater Treatise*, they would have been saying quite a lot. Dickens's incorporation of such "speaking waves" as a central image in his latest fiction demonstrated his ongoing engagement with a scientific culture that, in the 1840s, still retained an air of educated amateurism and populism. Alongside Babbage's *Treatise*, then, *Dombey and Son* showed interest in the transmission of sound as well as in the struggle to make sense of it, a struggle that acousticians like Helmholtz and Tyndall would go on to pursue with new attention to sound waves in the 1850s and 1860s. But Babbage's ideas yield a metaphor that resonates deeper still for Dickens. When the end finally does come for little Paul, in the chapter titled "What the Waves Were Always Saying," the waves are speaking not, or not only, of death, but also of a different kind of birth and life, that is to say, a revision or, more precisely, a never-ending broadcast, about which I will say more in a moment.

First, I want to turn to the other famous character in this novel, though it technically is not a character at all. Written during the "railway boom" of the 1840s, *Dombey and Son* revels in the arrival of the train "with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle." The railway brings "the shock of a great earthquake" to the neighborhood of Staggs's Gardens; "louder and louder yet," it hurls the elder Dombey along in a funereal rattle after little Paul's death; and it finally smashes into John Carker, one of Dickens's most insidious villains, "lick[ing] his stream of life up with its fiery heat, and cast[ing] his mutilated fragments in the air." The train is pure force, embodying the noisy thrust of the novel, propelling its characters as well as its plot. In this way, it is the literal manifestation of what Dickens aspires to do in language, the Express train that fuels his verbal expression. The sound and speed of the train allow for an immediacy and dynamism that Dickens the novelist longs to possess in language. It is during the period of writing *Dombey and Son*, the book through which an express train rattles and roars, that he truly begins to express this longing. From here forward, the authorial voice and the train act in tandem: as the stationmaster says to Carker right before the climactic death scene: "Express comes through at four, Sir.—It don't stop."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I think it curious that alongside the first few numbers of *Dombey and Son*, Dickens began republishing his first full-scale reprint of his earlier works, with revisions, for lower- and middle-class readers who had long stretches of time on their hands thanks to the new commuting and traveling possibilities the train presented. The Cheap Edition, as he called it, offered to the masses an entire copy of *Pickwick Papers* for a fraction of what the first edition had cost, and it promised to widen his audience to unprecedented levels. What's more, it is telling that in October 1846, as he was putting the finishing touches on the second number of *Dombey and Son*, he came up with the idea for the public reading tours that would send him on a transatlantic track back to Boston and beyond. And it is also telling that the first novel from which he derived a performance text would be *Dombey and Son*. A public reading tour "would be an *odd* thing," he wrote to his close friend John Forster. "I think it would take immensely." It did indeed. The touring went on to take an immense profit and the ultimate price—his life.

How to make sense of the novel, the reprints, the readings, all coming to Dickens at once? Here again is Babbage, from the ninth chapter of *The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise:*

> No motion impressed by natural causes, or by human agency, is ever obliterated. The ripple on the ocean's surface caused by a gentle breeze, or the still water which marks the more immediate track of a ponderous vessel gliding with scarcely expanded sails over its bosom, are equally indelible. The momentary waves raised by the passing breeze, apparently born but to die on the spot which saw their birth, leave behind them an endless progeny, which, reviving with diminished energy in other seas, visiting a thousand shores, reflected from each and perhaps again partially concentrated, will pursue their ceaseless course till ocean itself be annihilated.

The echoes of this passage in *Dombey and Son* are subtle yet significant: little Paul, like the momentary waves, is "*born, to die,*" and the waves themselves, ceaselessly bear to shore their "vast library" of "testimonies." But for Dickens the author, even more than for *Dombey and Son* the novel, the images from Babbage's chapter engender a fantasy of endless transmission in which a literary voice, the "motion of human agency" that is fictional narrative, crosses land as well as sea, "visiting a thousand shores" for eternity in the paperback versions and repeated performances of "endless progeny." If he could only publish and republish—and perform and reperform—enough, Dickens would create, or so perhaps he hoped, a "vast library" of his ever-present voices.

Forty years later, Thomas Edison's agent George Gouraud would set out in London to acquire phonograph recordings of Tennyson, Browning, and other famous Victorians as the basis for what he called a "Library of Voices." But Dickens already had begun building such an archive, in the spirit of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Babbage's "vast library" of voices etched on air, when he began touring and, in the spirit of Sloppy in *Our Mutual Friend*, "doing the fiction in different voices." Without realizing it, Babbage the natural philosopher had tapped into the desire that Dickens, struggling to find his voice, or voices, began to play out with and alongside the noisy soundscape of *Dombey and Son:* the desire to achieve authorial perpetuity at home and overseas—the desire, simply put, never to go out of circulation.

The centrality of Babbage's ideas to Dickens's career represents the kind of recovery it is possible to make once we begin to attend more closely to Victorian sound. I want to close not with a shriek or rattle or roar, however, but with an image that speaks louder than my words can. It is a picture of the only icon more closely associated with the age than Dickens, a portrait of Victoria herself, from the 2001 retrospective exhibit "Inventing New Britain: The Victorian Vision," held at the great archive of Victoriana, the Victoria and Albert Museum. To publicize the show, the V&A posted in London's South Kensington Underground station and elsewhere throughout the city a billboard of an enlarged and revised photograph of the elder Queen. In the original *carte de visite* picture, she was posed reading a book at a table. In the updated shot, Victoria's arm has been repositioned, the book has been digitally erased, and a bright red mobile phone has been slipped into her hand, so that, eyes downcast, she now appears to be engaged in an intense telephone conversation. This has historical precedent: Victoria allowed Bell to demonstrate the telephone to her on the Isle of Wight in 1878, in an event that connected several far-off stations but fell so behind schedule that the orchestra hired for the long-distance finale packed up and went home, leaving behind only the electrician Preece to hum "God Save the Queen" into the receiver. "It is the National Anthem!" the Queen reportedly said. "But it is very badly played!" As for the doctored image, there are, of course, any number of unanswerable questions it might provoke: To whom would she be speaking? And what would they be saying? If we pause a moment to tap the line in this piece of tongue-in-cheek propaganda, we might catch the whispered message on that telephone. It is not by chance that the last room of the exhibit featured a wall of phonograph recordings from the 1890s, where visitors could line up to don headphones and hear what resulted when Tennyson, Gladstone, and Nightingale shouted to make a needle shake. Those sounds on the other side of Victoria's silence are the fly's tramp, the volcano's roar, the train's screech, the waves' murmur, and her subjects' voices. The eerie spectacle of this "Victorian Vision" is the act of listening—to etched echoes buried deep in a vast library of air.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Grizzled Minstrels of Angst

Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan, Forever Old

TODD GITLIN

Youth's careless raptures don't age gracefully, for reasons that careless youth doesn't care about and age knows all too well. So the thought of an aging rock star sounds instantly oxymoronic, or, perhaps worse, fodder for a predictable, predictably jokey saga of decline and pratfall. Rock and its variants were born to be young, wild, limber, raucous, libidinous, to make Beethoven roll over and tell Tchaikovsky the news. When the superannuated rocker finds himself deported from the invisible nation of Youth, comparisons do come running—few of them favorable. What comes to mind is Elvis the lounge act, packed into a leisure suit, a bloated, enervated caricature of himself. There's an aesthetic satisfaction, by contrast, in the machine- or drug-driven early death that holds glamour in a perpetual freeze-frame. James Dean, Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, the Big Bopper, Otis Redding, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix—imagine these folks white-haired and you imagine them *no longer themselves:* in other words, dead. The Big Bopper dragging himself onstage at sixty-five? Opening for Mick Jagger, a windup replica of himself, the master of nonstop shtick? (But then Mick Jagger, in all his Satanic majesty, was always a marketing ploy, having long ago happened upon the bad-boy style as a branding move—the Rolling Stones as counter-Beatles.)

Chanteurs maudits would seem equally unpromising candidates for cultural longevity. Dark angels of song were, after all, born to be doomed. They were not supposed to last long enough to produce grown children and

Todd Gitlin, Professor of Culture, Journalism, and Sociology at New York University, is the author of nine books, most recently *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives.* He is a member of the SCHOLAR's Editorial Board.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

retrospectives. They are not supposed to be heaving themselves onstage, visibly wrinkled, in their seventh decade. No one—least of all the minstrels of angst themselves—would have anticipated that they would grow old in public, singing. Yet here they are, Leonard Cohen at sixty-seven and Bob Dylan at sixty, as if to the matter born.

It makes sense. These guys were already more than a little old—perhaps the more precise word is *venerable*—when they were young, defying any conventional contrast between their past and present selves. It turns out that lyrical darkness and deadpan surrealism wear well, and are not intrinsically hostile to ironic review or self-renewal. It turns out that Dylan can perform "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" at Madison Square Garden thirty-nine years after he wrote it (during the Cuban Missile Crisis) and pound it freshly into the minds of New Yorkers his grandchildren's age whose first collective memory is the World Trade Center massacre nine weeks earlier. It turns out that he can sing his way painlessly, not self-pityingly, through and past the line "The girls all say, 'You're a worn out star'" ("Summer Days," from *Love and Theft*), surrendering nothing. It turns out that Cohen, who "ache[s] in the places where I used to play" ("Tower of Song," from *I'm Your Man*) and is "summoned now to deal / With your invincible defeat" ("A Thousand Kisses Deep," from *Ten New Songs*) continues to jolt the mind with startling, original tracks from his passage through time. Having bypassed the fitful, idle frivolities of the young, our sages of music now manage the muted joys, discoveries, and ordeals of their somehow still-open futures.

So it was greatly to their advantage that Dylan and Cohen launched upon their eminence already broodingly old in their twenties, longing for—or pretending to long for—a magisterial presence from the start, chronicling failure as an achievement, brightly and rhythmically desperate, if always droll about it. Way back when, in the sixties, there were moments when Cohen and Dylan did celebrate the golden privileges of youth: Cohen privately, most famously, in "Suzanne," Dylan publicly in "The Times They Are A-Changin'." But mainly these young troubadours cast curses and cavernous prophecies in the direction of a world where success was a hoax, alienation an honor, joy a marketing tool, and a hard rain was a-gonna fall. They were hungry, but they knew it was not their world. Twisted by "society's pliers," bored by the bourgeois life, they didn't mind—or pretended not to mind—having a screw loose. Risks and traps be damned, on with the adventure!

Luckily for them and for their fans, the two of them are far from finished riding their ups and downs. Maybe it was sheer luck that they never quite overdosed from toxic experience. In any event, they both came out with new CDs last fall, continuing to offer their discomfiting reassurances, not least of which is the unyielding fact that after forty years, more or less, *they're still here.* Chronicling their lives, they accompany our own. The gift of their continuity requires no less attention than ever. Of their generation, they have the mountaintop all to themselves. No political leaders their age accompany

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

them with anything like an equivalent four-decade presence. No filmmakers, no playwrights, no novelists, no poets. That these strange angels of our disorder remain with us, alive to the world, still themselves, or again themselves, yet not repeating themselves—this is no small cultural miracle.

Any generalization of the sort I have been making risks the sin of lumping together two quite different artists. Generational proximity aside, the *Zeit* does not fuse Cohen and Dylan into a single *Geist.* Through all their vicissitudes, they remain as far apart as ever in tone, topic, voice, and spirit. The differences that were there from the beginning remain differences. Dylan, the trickster, cultivates weirdness, and his talent lies in making the weird sound commonplace. Cohen, the defrocked rabbi, makes the commonplace sound weird.

Dylan came to prominence by displaying a moralist streak, but he gave up his political earnestness early to take up residence in a fun-house world of freaks, geeks, and paranoids. The night played tricks, there must be some way out of here, I ain't got a dime—his imagination careened frantically, even if he relished toying around, assuring us in his deadpan drollery that he'd seen it all, there was really nothing to be surprised at and therefore nothing to fear. Down Positively Fourth St. and Highway 61, through idiot winds, down streets that he did know, decade after decade, he was rarely short of another trap to leap out of. "I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more." "Now, the senator came down here / Showing ev'ryone his gun." "Well, Frankie Lee and Judas Priest, they were the best of friends." "Businessmen, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth." For decades Dylan has escorted us down the garish desolation row that leads, in *Love and Theft,* the new album, to "Tweedle-dee Dum and Tweedle-dee Dee / They're throwing knives into the tree / Two big bags of dead man's bones / Got their noses to the grindstones." And: "They got Charles Darwin trapped out there on Highway Five / Judge says to the High Sheriff, 'I want him dead or alive.'" Right.

Cohen, on the other hand, is the disabused believer. Never has he feared earnestness or abstraction. When he announced in 1966 that he was going to become the Canadian Dylan, he meant more than going electric. He didn't intend to give up pain, angst, or the grand declaration about how—and how wrong—things were. He wasn't going to abandon self-sacrificial passion even for the cool charms of the siren of detachment. He didn't succeed in squaring the circle until he was in his fifties, but when he succeeded, he did so lustrously. Wrestling with a monotheism that never quite gave up the ghost, Cohen kept summoning up the rabbinical voice. He declared—and continues to declare—the tenor and temper of life in a state of advanced decay. But the light of the deep shines through the stink of corruption. Behind the petty facts of existence stands the stark color of truth. Part of what endures in his work is the way Cohen loves juxtaposing the sublime and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the absurd, as in: "We were locked in this kitchen / I turned to religion." ("Religion is my favorite hobby," he told an interviewer a few years ago. "It's deep and voluptuous.") Because there is, one way or another, a world beyond this world. The material world stands for more than itself. "The age of lust is giving birth." "There's a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in."

Cohen caresses paradoxes, spinning reversals, lyrical koans. Opposites are frequently coupled. Pleasure is squeezed into enclosure. He sings a "Broken Hallelujah." He beckons: "Let's do something crazy, something absolutely wrong." In *Ten New Songs*, he groans: "I fought against the bottle, but I had to do it drunk." The ten new songs are subdued, even frail, as if Cohen has already wobbled into an afterlife. Love comes and love goes out the door. The moment of truth dissolves. "You live your life as if it's real," Cohen rumbles—one can scarcely say "sings," his voice having not only deepened but been strangely purified over the years, gaining sobriety as it has lost much of its always modest range.

There are mysteries—possibly only obscurities—in his latest lyrics, but the bright thread that winds throughout is an argument with the ineffable, an argument that goes by the name of Zen Buddhism, which he has famously practiced for years, and which led him to take up residence in recent years atop a mountain in Southern California to sit zazen in the company of his Roshi. In contrast to the fundamental, the self is a "scavenger," a poor insect.

Children of light need children of darkness, even if only to remind them of what they want to avoid. John Denver used to parse Cohen's lyrics.

"Did you know Bob Dylan was nominated for the Nobel Prize four times?" stage-whispered a young medical student sitting behind me at Madison Square Garden, waiting for Dylan's concert to begin last November 19. "Page 82 of his biography," he confided, his scholarship well polished. Such is the desire for earthly recognition of the unspeakably awesome. Such was the eagerness of the waiting before Dylan showed up, a half hour late, in a pink suit.

Dylan spent the evening intoning his ancient texts in a nasal rumble as he lunged with little dance steps around the stage. "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" was written almost forty years ago by a fevered twenty-one-year-old, but the song remains an ever-ready prophecy of apocalypse, as if scripted for September 11: "Heard the roar of a wave that could drown the whole world." Indeed. If Americans who lack the taste for apocalypse are now getting to know the grain and texture, the look and the stench of doom, Dylan must have been less surprised than most. He always exuded the confidence of a battered man who suffered, who was *there,* who emerged from the wreck convinced that he knew that the engineer, the conductor, and the gabby seatmate were to blame.

For all these decades Dylan has put words and music to a resonant conviction that nothing comes easily, that the city on the hill is mined. Words

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and music. The music should not be neglected. To Dylan have been attributed delphic powers of language, but his power—like Cohen's—is deeply, crucially musical. Beware of the word *poet* in a culture hanging on to literary prestige in order to disguise the fact that literature commands hardly any attention. In truth, neither Cohen nor Dylan ranks high as a poet. (Cohen's precious novels are weak, too.) Left to bare words, each strains too hard. Without music, their words too often read like pretentious ramblings—Rimbaud left in the oven too long. Dylan's liner notes, like Cohen's published poetry and fiction, are trapped in sophomoric disconnection and adolescent portentousness. However unfashionable it may be to insist, the two of them are masters of melody.

How do you grow old in public? Ironically. You can't pretend your way into starting all over again. But the problem is not new. Thirty-five years ago, Dylan already knew that he had become—had propelled himself into becoming—"Dylan," the self-packaged, branded, electrified prince of our disorder. By his own lyrical hand he had barely begun when he was mocking his own gravity, as in: "Now, little boy lost, he takes himself so seriously / He brags of his misery, he likes to live dangerously." Today, in many of his concerts, Dylan ironizes by delivering his lines with distortions of rhythm and phrasing so stark that the lyrics are well-nigh unrecognizable, and even the identity of the song may not be clear for a stanza or two, as if it had been passed on down through several rounds of a child's game of "Telephone."

But his work suffers when he tries to rejuvenate his oeuvre by fiddling with his own melodic and rhythmic achievements. When he sings "Blowin' in the Wind" with a discordant updraft at each line's end, an outsider can only believe that he strives to refresh himself. To do so would challenge any performer who tours for hundreds of shows as custodian of a high-demand repertoire. It's harder still when live performances must compete with the technical perfections of the studio. The wages of success are boredom. What do you do for an encore? Too often Dylan's recourse is self-mutilation. The jester trashes his own lines. The best to be said for this self-rewriting is that the master is frolicking. It is a kind of modesty that he practices. At times, he rises above past excess: his snarl is stylized now, stripped of the meanness, say, of "You just kinda wasted my precious time." A few straight-ahead songs, like "Forever Young," gain from recasting. But mainly, erasing his past achievement, Dylan doesn't surpass himself. Rather, denying himself his own melodies and muffling his own lyrics, he darts behind a cartoon version of himself.

And yet, even this derivative Dylan counts. In the critical mode, the fan may complain or rejoice, but these are but two lower forms of acknowledgment. The critic wants an appraisal, but the fan wants a witness to his own life, and for the grace of this continuity, the lifelong writer and singer of songs, the bringer of gifts, deserves to receive tributes in return. In Dylan's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

case, the self-mutilation is apparent only because the canonical performance is there for the asking, recorded forever. In Cohen's, the relative mutedness of the new songs, their freedom from bitterness and flaming desire, underscores the transitory nature of youthful fervor, conveying a Zen truth. In either case, when asked, whorls of memory summon up the unaltered grooves. The liveness of the living idol reminds the fan that the work remains. Allusions to, and failures to surpass, the ancient texts only preserve their unsurpassability. The accidental gift of the new work is to underscore the continuing presence of the old.

Neither *Ten New Songs* nor *Love and Theft* belongs at the top of a career chart. But, if flawed, the lifelong presence delivers the existential message: *still alive, in process, underway.* The bearer of the defiant voice is with us, is surprising, is himself, is unfinished.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

John Muir's Alaskan Rhapsody

EDWARD HOAGLAND

John Muir (1838–1914), being diligent first and a dreamer second, wore many hats. So although he was a visionary—a founder of the Sierra Club and savior of Yosemite National Park—we do have quite a wonderfully meticulous record of the progress of his visions. In middle age and on the brink of his belated marriage, after considerable wandering in the Great Lakes and Appalachian wildernesses as a rattled and anguished but indefatigable young man, and then more definitively in California's High Sierra as an amateur botanist and geologist, he went almost inevitably to Alaska. Where else would an American rhapsodist of wild places ultimately go? Joy, in fact, was his currency, although he didn't know it at the time. He thought that in such scenic mightiness he was studying glaciers: and he did do some original work on them. But a century and a quarter later, we are reading his account because there in the glorious fiords, "the great fresh unblighted, unredeemed wilderness," he is at our elbow, nudging us along, prompting us to understand that heaven is on earth—*is* the Earth—and rapture is the sensible response wherever a clear line of sight remains.

Thoreau's more famous agenda, back East in Massachusetts sixty years before *Travels in Alaska* was finished, had been to try to alter the way that people lived, with regard both to nature and to each other. Thus, wilderness figured as rather a minor factor in *Walden*'s ruminations. The godhead could be located much nearer home, in a backlot pond ("earth's eye"), as well as in a mountain massif. At one point elsewhere Thoreau advocated that every

Edward Hoagland is the author of nearly twenty books, two of which have just come out in paperback: *Notes from the Century Before* (Modern Library) and his memoir, *Compass Points* (Vintage). He lives in Bennington, Vermont. His most recent contribution to the SCHOLAR was "Fire" (Autumn 2000). This essay is the Introduction to Modern Library's new edition of John Muir's *Travels in Alaska*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

township should preserve one square mile in a natural state. Hardly a wilderness but sufficient—you didn't need to roam the frontier in order to find it.

Muir, although he carried a volume of Thoreau's essays on his first trip to Alaska, seems to have expected that you did need to roam the frontier, and we are the beneficiaries because he exerted his stringbean frame so strenuously to search. The journal jottings from which he fashioned most of his books, often decades later, were originally the product of scientific more than literary ambition, but otherwise were hymns of praise. He lived for Emersonian Transcendentalism perhaps more singlemindedly than even Emerson or Thoreau—who were involved in the Abolition movement and other controversies such as women's rights and the injustice of the Mexican War, and the contemporary intellectual currents that they lectured on for a livelihood: an activity that the shyer Muir didn't begin to take to until later in life, and then only as a polemicist for the cause of preservation.

Muir was up in mountains that would have flabbergasted the Massachusetts men—mountains of a pelagic scale that dwarfed the White Mountains or Mount Katahdin. There is no disjunction, however, between their concepts of nature except that the New Englanders more fully comprehended that human nature is a part of nature and were more interested in it. Muir, awestruck by the cathedral, kept gazing up into the nave, whereas Thoreau had a habit of noticing and quarreling with the conduct of the parishioners. And until lately, when we have become a bit panicky at the disappearance of wild landscapes nearly everywhere, and what we call "the natural world," Muir was scanted as a marginal, a johnny-one-note, figure. A few decades ago, it was hard to find an Eastern literary person who had even heard of him, and, although I *had*, my appreciation of his love of radiance, his seize-the-day impetuosity yet tireless exactitude—so calm, except about life's gleeful dimensions—has grown by leaps and bounds. Despite extraordinary feats of derring-do, he didn't climb to conquer nature but to witness and to savor it, testing not his braggadocio but his faith: which is more interesting.

Thoreau (1817–62) himself had required at least half a century posthumously to gather much attention, although pantheism is a big-tent religion. It was especially exalting for a self-taught observer like Muir, because God does indeed reside in the details. Canoeing in the outwash of huge glaciers was geology sprung alive. Like Bach on Sunday, he found that he was delineating the anatomy, the raiments, of joy. Nobody is against natural grandeur; monotheists accept the premise that God created that too. And Alaska itself is a big tent, perennially compelling as a "last" wilderness. But it was the tumult Muir reveled in that scares most of us. He was elastic and enlivened out-of-doors, rising as if on a thermal, or like a fish freed from an aquarium. This era before the Klondike Gold Rush brought in crowds of settlers, and almost thirty years before Mount McKinley was first climbed, exhilarated instead of intimidating him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jack London would preempt Muir's rapturous interpretations of Alaska for decades to come with his tales of nature red in tooth and claw—just as now we tend to neglect London for Muir. Both were Californians; both had had brutalized childhoods (Muir's in Scotland, his birthplace, and in Wisconsin), which made them rolling stones and ardent romantics; London's religion was socialism. And both wrote immortal dog stories based on real animals—Buck, the brave, wolfish hero of *The Call of the Wild,* and Stickeen, of *Stickeen,* the intuitive, intrepid Border collie mix who accompanied Muir on several hairy Alaskan ice-field adventures near the Stikine River. But London (1876–1916) died at forty, burnt out, disillusioned, whereas Muir ripened into a seventy-six-year-old celebrity replete with loving daughters and grandchildren and a roster of national accomplishments. He knew that having influenced two presidents, Roosevelt and Taft, toward preservationist action was of lasting significance and that his magazine articles had been battle-tested. But he probably never recognized that his books, as books, would have real staying power, too. Otherwise he wouldn't have written *My First Summer in the Sierra* at the end of his life from forty-year-old notes; dictated his autobiography, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth,* to the millionaire railroadman Edward Harriman's secretary, only at Harriman's insistence; and postponed the completion of *Travels in Alaska* (a better book) until pneumonia beat him to the punch and another sympathetic secretary had to do the final editing.

Just as, like Thoreau and Emerson, he didn't foresee the furnace of destruction, ever-accelerating industrially and technologically, that would afflict nature worldwide, Muir was not in a position to imagine how rare his experiences, and especially his frequent bouts of virtual ecstasy, would strike and register with us—"dancing down" the mountains, sunbeaten, trackless mountains themselves "made divine." Because of Charles Darwin, Rudyard Kipling, the Brothers Grimm, and the cutthroat competition of free enterprise, a nature portrayed like London's as red in tooth and claw was no surprise to most people. But for nature conveyed as glee we had to remember writers like Ivan Turgenev and W. H. Hudson, or the *Odyssey* and the biblical Song of Songs. In a burstingly utilitarian, expansive country it had been considered countereconomic, "backward" like a primitive shaman, to conceive of nature as rapturous and therefore potentially precious—that was for the Indians, who had been decimated and swept aside in the march of progress. Yet Muir's longevity isn't due just to his being on the right-thinking side of a farsighted struggle. So were George Perkins Marsh (1801–82), his precursor protoconservationist, and others who have since disappeared from the debate. Muir loved the world—loved Creation—so much that we, being part of it, can warm to him almost physiologically as we read along. Dire prophecies don't work as well on us as rhapsodies. Muir was a rather shaky, chilly, wounded individual in person, like many nature writers who are seeking a balm for their injuries. But he loved the calving, thunderous glaciers, the "fountaining"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

snowfields way high up among the peaks that were their source, and the rainy maritime clouds that replenished these. The green waves and white spindrift shone in a fitful sunlight that was refracted amazingly, prismatically through the stunning planes of ice—blue and red—as the weather revolved around his thirty-six-foot Tlingit dugout canoe, with an occasional seal hunter bobbing by in a smaller craft offering him a fresh salmon for ten cents.

The joy he felt was hard to ascribe simply to Evolution's provision for survival tools. I've been to the mouth and watershed of the Stikine myself, during the middle 1960s, when it still seemed somewhat *the way the world was made,* as I kept murmuring to myself, watching seals surfacing in the tangled currents, the salmon running, the eagles posted profusely in the trees, the swimming otters, beavers, bears, and teeming rafts of river birds. I goggled and grinned—mainly at the dashing, wheeling mobs of waterbirds, the sudden sandbars and piled-up drift logs challenging our boat, the river's jumbo, roaring rush and backwash sloughs, under the snowy, high horizons—never having seen such dimensions of gush and ebullience before. Words were so fragile by comparison that Muir must have thought them inadequate to the task of conveying everything he had witnessed on these herculean trips. But not knowing how frangible the wilderness itself would prove to be, he couldn't guess how valuable his experiences, even partially preserved, would come to seem.

In *Travels in Alaska,* a valedictory bouquet to the magic of life, presented in his middle seventies—when, more confidently, he'd plucked some of the high points of his memories—Muir censored his personal reactions less timorously and betrayed more intimacy with his companions than in lone-wolf books like *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf, My First Summer in the Sierra,* and *The Mountains of California,* that retrieve earlier history. In Alaska, in his forties, he had felt much more empathy with the Tlingits than he ever had with California's shattered "Digger" Indians, while in his thirties. And to the Tlingits he was a "Boston man," their term for American whites, because the first Americans they had met were whalers out of Massachusetts, as distinct from the Russian fur-seal hunters who initially laid claim to Alaska. So by this amusing bit of irony, which Muir must have perceived, he was at last linked with his heroes in Concord, Thoreau and Emerson.

Yet because of the magnetism of the landscapes he gravitated toward, which were biblical in scale and "innocence" and ballasted his jitters, he is unique. Unique, as well, because interstitial to his effusions of frank and genuine inspiration (such as the great British explorers seldom indulged in) were the kind of close, specific observations that a man of science would demand of his notes, which keeps them intriguing for us. We wind through these drenched and bristly islands with him, a man as spartan as but less judgmental of the early gold rushers than Thoreau would have been, and more interested, in any case, in "the plant people," "the little ones as well as the trees," than in the human ones, even the Indians, while the clouds are

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"fondling" the mountainsides. "Standing here," he says near Cape Fanshaw, "one learns that the world, though made, is yet being made; that this is still the morning of creation." Which echoes Walden's celebrated ending: "There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star."

Not a caroming radical fixated on brute force, like Jack London, or a spiky contrarian like Thoreau, Muir was a practical, canny Scotsman grounded in exactitude but bathing in a splendidly self-effacing joy. He had been to the Nile and Amazon, to China, Siberia, and India by the time he finally put his nose to the grindstone and wrote his fragmentary Alaska book, and wasn't tempted to gussy it polemically. He wished to steep it in the exuberance he felt, and sustains the narrative thrust and the timbre of his superlatives more convincingly than in earlier books. Love was the wellspring of all his work, but these memories were doubly intense and central. He was truly a *coureur de bois,* a "runner of the woods," a sort of Franciscan Daniel Boone, who upbraided his Indian companions when they shot more than one deer (he himself ate bread, rice, and beans) and rocked the canoe to spoil their aim when they tried for a duck.

Transcendentalism, located between Puritanism and pragmatism in America's philosophical development, has an enduring appeal, and Muir lived it as an exemplary avatar. Though his mind was narrower than Thoreau's, his life, which stretched much longer, was broadened further, with reams of new experiences and new acquaintances. Then, in old age, white-bearded, he even played a docent's role for hikes and overnighters with members of the Sierra Club. (Indeed, it might be argued that Thoreau, after the disappointment of *Walden*'s failure to find much of a readership, became increasingly Muir-like in his focus upon natural history, until he died of tuberculosis at forty-four.) For both of them, heaven was the here and now, with daily intimations of divinity. This exhilaration is what gradually lifted Muir out of the category of regional California writer, such as Bret Harte, in which he once languished. He had possessed a marked charisma, for those who knew him, and a bully pulpit in magazines like *The Overland Monthly* and *The Atlantic Monthly* for hortatory purposes. But the high-pitched extravagance of his Alaska account, with a waterfall of observations accompanying it, about the Stikine and Taku rivers and Sum Dum Bay and Glacier Bay, is not arguing a point. It is a riff and a testament, when he was at death's door, of days back in paradise, hasty paced because his stay was limited. He had had to leave his calling there and go and get married (again, the next year, for the birth of his first baby) and breathe the nitrogen of ordinary life instead of pure oxygen. He was dutiful enough, but we have other writers who have chronicled domesticity and scarcely any who have gone up unravished rivers to the meadows, rock, and ice of origination. As more and more of us grow aghast at what we have done to the world we started with, Muir's reverence and devotion will seem keenly germane, and our regret may be transmuted into a fight for the future.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Seed

BRIAN SWANN

from inside the steel box a white arm
reaches round, fingers fumbling for the bolts, someone
inside squirming like a magician to slip straps,
strip down to a different surrender
that once free will push like freight through margins & floes,
pry sod & air so the holes will not close, insisting into existence, pushing
down dream to draw on, suck it up into gold & going,
lamps fastened to hip & head to skewer
litheness on the pulse, shock itself into rain, past
pebble & worm, nerves dancing, fingers flung at moon & sun,
toes dug into embers, light slowly whirling in & through, a cadence linked
to birdsong that never falters & finds itself in itself
scattering from the brow hard black songs, bright trills
that fall & sit, waiting for new arms to reach,
fingers to loosen fountains
day & night, make almost anything
naked clear & preemptive

Brian Swann's most recent book is *Wearing the Morning Star*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Inferno

SUSAN MAHLER

I wake at 5:30 A.M. The digital clock radio, still an hour from its warbling static eruption, lances the darkness with an eerie gray-green light. But I do not need to look at the clock to guess the time. I awaken between five and six each morning now, since I increased the dose of Restoril, a sleep medication. Without it, I am up by two or three.

By the clock, the vials of pills loom like ghostly icons. I think that the vials are still full. I do not remember taking the pills last night, do not remember their medicinal flavors on my tongue, though I do remember holding their heft in my palm, the chalky disks of lithium and the svelte capsules of nortriptyline, spilling over one another like ants. In modest doses these pills have failed me, but in a single massive dose I know they will not let me down. I imagine the elemental salt of lithium, poisoning the endless coiled tubules of the kidneys, causing a backlog of toxic waste, halting elimination, filling the bloodstream with a sludge that obscures thinking, causes nausea, tremor, convulsions, coma, death. So says the pharmacology textbook on my shelf. I have to take it on faith. The nortriptyline is different. Its target is the electrical conduction system of the heart, where it disrupts the deft coordinated rhythms of atria and ventricles. A wrong pause here, a mistimed contraction there—a moment's delay will ensure swift death.

Or perhaps I did take them; perhaps I am already dead. Maybe for this reason the sky will not lighten this morning. I search the horizon for some variation, some burnishing of rust or indigo against the blackness.

I climb out of bed, pull on my running tights and nylon cap, lace up my shoes. My face encounters the chill darkness, and my body, though I would

Susan Mahler practices psychiatry in the Boston area. Her writing has appeared in *Pandora, The Western Journal of Medicine,* and other publications. She is currently working on a memoir about psychiatric training and healing in psychotherapy.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

swear it is moving, is quickly penetrated by the cold. Yes, I think, this is what death feels like.

I move through the night, hearing nothing but the muffled stomp of my shoes, the soft heave of my breath. *Out with the bad air, in with the good air.* As I breathe I try to draw the suffocating toxins away from my heart, clear the bellows of my lungs, sweep the haunted house of my mind clean of its ghosts. I breathe purposefully, with the intention of a high-altitude mountaineer, sucking scarce oxygen from the thin air.

The sky begins to lighten. The bare branches of trees, spindly and fractal against the rose and tangerine sky, are so painfully beautiful that I want to cry. I am filled with gratitude at the sight; at the same time I think I cannot bear the magnificence of this earth a moment longer.

I know this place well. Like Persephone, pomegranate eater, I find myself cast at intervals into the dark underworld, to atone for my earthly appetites. The pattern is always the same: the medicine works, then it stops working. We change doses, add drugs, consult specialists, until a new balance is struck. In between, I am Hades' bride.

Pain takes up residence in the most innocent spaces. A photograph, a billboard, books on their shelves. Deviously my mind tarnishes these images by associating them with my age, my isolation, time and talent wasted. I search desperately for a safe haven, a resting place for these eyes, stinging from the toxic fumes.

In nature, there is measured relief; here I find images relatively untainted by poisonous repercussions. I therefore seek out beauty. I suck it from my senses like nectar, leech it from the world like a mosquito extracting blood through his proboscis. I look at the splintering of birches against the sky. When the effect of their beauty fades, I look at a clump of snow in the gnarled roots, bluish in the early light. When this too fades, I remove my gloves, stare at the faint spidery veins, the rake of tendons beneath the skin. Back again to the tree. And so the hour passes.

One early morning I go out to take pictures. I wipe the snow from the car windows with my hands and drive through the countryside around my parents' Vermont home, sucking in scenery. When I come upon a particularly poignant image—a single hay bale in a frosted field, tombstones backlit with a reverential light—I snap the shutter. I develop the pictures the same morning, poring over the glossy prints compulsively, like an addict seeking to recapture the rush of his first high.

Complex images are problematic, laden with painful associations. My mind becomes increasingly reductive: objects dissolve into their component parts, solace is to be found in patterns, textures, hues. Colors are a particular source of relief. I buy a skein of yarn for its rich shades of amber, magenta, mauve, ochre. I wrap the thread round my fingers, but I cannot seem to knit. When I reach the end of a row I stop, stare into space, lose my place

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the pattern. Sometimes I stop in the middle of the row, because there suddenly seems no reason to continue.

It occurs to me one day that this is how people survive intolerable isolation, confinement, deprivation. Pleasure is relative; with practice one can subsist for days on the strength of a slight modulation in pain. Rats will continue to press a lever, even if rewarded with food only once in a thousand attempts. The organism seeks a way out, a reason for hope despite all evidence to the contrary.

Brian Keenan, an Irish teacher held hostage in Lebanon for nearly five years, has written of the weeks spent in solitary confinement. More than his captors, his mind terrorized him. He tried to resist the sudden torrents of tears, the abyss of despair. One day his guard arrived with the morning meal. But instead of the usual crust of bread with jam, Keenan received a bowl of fruit: apricots, oranges, cherries, nuts. He was mesmerized. He placed an orange in his palm, embraced its color, dissolved himself in this visual feast. He did not wish to eat it; he was satiated with the image, it sustained him, it was enough. When the guard tried to remove the bowl, Keenan erupted. Recklessly he grabbed the guard's hand, saying, "I want to see, I want to see!"

Like Keenan, I hoard my pleasures, I dole them out with care. If you can get through another hour, another session, you can look again at the trees. Or run your fingers through the nubby yarn. You can smell the lavender soap or apply another dollop of hand lotion. You can suck on another cough drop.

I do not seem to want food, but I have developed a fondness for the fruit-flavored lozenges that now fill my pockets and propel me through the day. Otherwise I prefer innocuous foods that require little effort to consume. For a week or so I eat mainly yogurt and packages of peanut-butter crackers. It is quite impossible to prepare food beyond buttering toast. More complex meals baffle me; at a Chinese restaurant I stare at the beef and green beans on my plate, and they appear to multiply, exhausting my strength even as I try to mow down their numbers.

I go to work, at the outpatient mental health clinic. I steel myself in the car; it's only another hour, another half-hour, you can do it. But I am not convinced. It requires all my energy to maintain an erect posture and murmur a greeting. When the patient is gone, I am again slumped over my desk, lifeless, until the next appointment arrives.

By midday I must go home. I drive erratically, urgently, and arrive home to fall on the couch in my den, wrapping my body in the soft green throw my parents gave me years ago. It seems I will never again be able to stand, speak, eat, or drink. I know that the pills and the telephone are only a few yards away, yet I have not the will to get up, either to kill myself or to call someone for help. One day this paralysis strikes while I am in the shower,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and I am suddenly afraid I will not be able to rinse the soap from my hair.

After this incident I become convinced that I am not keeping myself clean. I begin to fear that I have forgotten to wash, or to brush my teeth, or to apply deodorant. There are other aspects of hygiene I worry about. My forgetfulness becomes more diffuse: I mistake the name of a patient's girlfriend, I write down a phone number and find it has too few digits. I forget to turn off the stove or the coffeemaker. I start to unplug the electrical appliances when I leave the house. I am terrified I will make an error in writing a prescription. I write it, say the name and dose of the drug aloud so that my patient can confirm it, then call the pharmacy to ensure that I am correct.

Time slows unaccountably. Minutes seem like hours, hours like days, days are an eternity. The future encompasses only minutes and hours; all other designations—next week, next month—are meaningless.

Years ago I ran a marathon. I had trained well and ran almost without effort for the first fifteen miles. Around mile eighteen, something changed. My legs, heretofore weightless and obedient, now stubbornly refused the commands of my brain. My arms grew heavy, my breathing more labored. Around me I saw other runners, bent at the waist or walking, a limp hand clasped to a hip. Mind over matter, I told myself. One foot in front of the other. You go on.

For days and weeks, I feel as though I am hitting mile eighteen, each minute of each hour.

The message machine blinks, but phone conversation is too difficult; at night I unplug the phone altogether. People fall past me like trees past the windows of a high-speed train, a dizzying and indistinct blur. They cannot reach me, nor I them. There are moments of relative calm. Like a climber moving delicately on an ice floe, I am ever watchful, and yet I cannot predict the patches of precarious incandescence, the giant crevasses that open suddenly, plummeting me a mile's depth through the snow.

It is a Saturday morning, a week since I started the latest medication regimen, a combination of two antidepressants and a mood stabilizer. I awake to daylight; the heat soaks the bedcovers, light streaks the wood floors. My gaze moves from the window to the adjacent bookcase, the one housing those volumes I cannot bring myself to read. I scan the titles, awaiting certain recrimination, the mortifying sting of self-reproach. Nothing. I look more closely at these books, take note of their crisp jackets, the serrated edges of ivory paper, imbued with dark ink. I suddenly think that I would like to enter these worlds.

I get out of bed. I am hungry—no, ravenous. I want orange juice, toast; no, French toast, soaked with maple syrup. I begin to think of other things I want: to visit a friend, listen to music, go for a run.

I run on the back roads near my house, past the wooded reservoir, reedy

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and ice strewn, past the family-run farm with its display of wreaths and spruce trees. I run past a child wearing a hooded parka, her mittened hand clasped in her mother's. I hold my breath; the sadness washes through me, surf tumbling on the shore and then receding.

I turn my gaze upward to the trees, laced with snow. They are lovely, but no more so than the houses hung with icicles, a child's snowman, or, indeed, than this child herself, pulling at her mother's hand. With pain at bay, nature's beauty loses its starkness. I feel relief—and also regret.

Once I saw a movie about a rock climber falling from a steep ascent. One by one, the fist-sized pieces of protection failed, plucked from the rock like a sickening metallic thread. Shrieking, the man fell earthward, caught at only the last possible moment by the final remaining cam. He stopped, jerked momentarily into unconsciousness, then hung limply, trembling, uncertain of his own continued existence.

And so it is that I find myself today, shaky and depleted, filled with relief, mistrust, gratitude, shame. I feel myself standing—wounded, but upright—on a battlefield gone suddenly quiet, afraid to move for fear of triggering a hidden mine, my eyes still smarting from gun smoke, ears ringing from the cannons' roar. I am aware of one thing: the absence of intense pain. Sadness hangs loosely on me, a gauzy curtain through which I can yet make out the world, quite unlike yesterday's window shade of grief, leaden and impenetrable. Slowly, hesitantly, I take stock: I piece through the wreckage—the lapsed friendships, the late assignments, the missed social engagements, the lost minutes and hours with my patients, the new creases of despair on my face—and begin to rebuild.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A Lesson in Narrative Time

JODY BOLZ

Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment.
—Rumi

In the empty classroom
you call roll without speaking
and the missing stir in vacant chairs
(here—still here)
until the heavy door shifts

and students jam the entrance
students who are always young
nineteen twenty twenty-one
though you're consigned to aging.
What a weird arrangement—

Aaron Leah Dave
in place of Adam Sarah Robb.
You smile as you greet them
glancing at your notebook:
Back-story and pacing

(see page 80—"Signs and Symbols").
Drizzle dulls the window.
Maryam Jacob Azza
for April Jon Roberto
an imperfect equation

that makes change its constant.
Watching their pens drift
across each blue-lined page
you hear yourself explain
how stories are assembled

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from summary and scene.
Valentina (late again)
enters smiling vaguely
slides in next to Jacob
at the far end of the table

long neck blotchy with arousal
or embarrassment—
she's bolted from a lover's bed
and run to school this once
without the cultured

indifference, that thoroughbred
loveliness with which she's kept
her distance. . . .
Some mystery is essential
but suspense is not enough.

Her father could be a spy
instead of a diplomat
(they've lived in eastern Europe).
Conflict's not enough unless
it tugs a thread of revelation.

Jacob's eyes rivet now
on Valentina's hand
which flies
to pull a rubber band
from musky sun-streaked hair.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tension is essential
in a pattern of change
but structure's secondary.
So screw
the Freitag triangle—

this is not geometry—
and toss easy reverie
in slo-mo fade-outs
and flashbacks of eager sex.
Passion's not enough

in fiction.
Craft is not enough
and edge is not enough.
Confession's not enough.
So screw nonfiction

parading as fiction
and screw fiction
posing as fact.
Voyeurism's not enough.
Did Jacob get his tongue

pierced first
or after Valentina?
See what's happened
to the oral tradition . . .
when either speaks

a gold stud gleams:
O bright revelation!
Plot's a fine contrivance
gears and flywheels
shimmering—

The rain stops.
A truck honks.
Leah takes
her glasses off.
Valentina's hand goes up.

Jody Bolz, whose poems have appeared recently in *Ploughshares, Indiana Review, Gargoyle, River Styx,* and *The Women's Review of Books,* teaches at George Washington University.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Pallbearers' Knees

FREDERICK BUSCH

Fiddling with the hairs on an elephant's nose is indecent when the elephant happens to be standing on the baby.
—John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction*

Writing, as I do here, about certain authorial indecencies and false moves to which John Gardner addressed his powerful attention so instructively, and about the responsibilities of the literary artist to write with dying in mind, I will employ the word *career*. I will not be referring to conferences at which one hands out business cards, novels-in-progress, one's opinion, or one's body; nor will I be making reference to reviews one writes or receives, readings one gives or solicits, jobs one deserves or anyway secures at a college or university. I will use the word to refer to the sustained effort—over years, and in spite of dismay or evident failure—to find fictive *questions* that suit the fictive *answers* dragged, like Marley's chains, by writers condemned to horde and to haul them, rusting and rattling, behind.

Writers have been finding answers all their lives. They watched and listened, from a parent's or relative's lap, from under a table or around a corner in their childhood apartment or house; they noted what the adults did as they told each other lies, truths, and stories containing each. A dear friend has described to me how, as a preadolescent child, she watched as an uncle, who had arrived very late the night before, had breakfast with her parents. He sought their counsel in whispers that the writer-to-be made certain to hear in every hiss and phlegmy pause, because the man's wife, an aunt whom the writer knew and admired for her opulent perfume and the sense she generated of living in a world the writer's parents didn't know, was conducting an affair. The writer-kid thought an affair was something for which the grown-ups engaged a band and rented a big restaurant in a nearby

Frederick Busch is Fairchild Professor of Literature at Colgate University. His most recent book is *Don't Tell Anyone*, a collection of stories. "Truth, Lies, Fact, Fiction" appeared in the SCHOLAR's Summer 2000 issue.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

suburb. But she understood some of it. And she saw, from her hiding place, that instead of pouring milk, the uncle, as he talked and paused and possibly wept, poured his orange juice into his coffee—and none of the adults, the writer-kid noticed, noticed.

Because one is born a writer, and because such people persevere at a certain pleasurable loneliness, and because a writer-kid's brain is made of words, she saved that moment. She tells me that she used it half a dozen times in high school and college when she wrote her stories. Now she is using it again, and this time, she thinks, she has *it* right. The *it* is what I think of as the *question*, not the answer. What she noted in her uncle's distress—about the failure of self-awareness, or an overdose of self-awareness; about the immensity of pain that is accidentally expressed through routine gestures; about what we need to say and cannot; about what we say in spite of our silence: that is the *answer*. One is a writer because one has been searching—trying to appear casual about it, maybe whistling or having a baby or performing surgery to a doberman's abdominal wall—for the *question*: the situation, the environment, the junction of person and event, imagined and actual, that makes this answer matter in a story of lives that lift from the page to resonate with metaphoric importance.

That's a writing career: finding the answers, and living with a teeming headful until the questions occur—the result of prayer, enchantment, dumb luck, and the generosity of those whose lives one spies upon—so that the writer can pretend to be answering a question that matters in the reader's life. The career, of course, consists of making the reader respond to what is actually the reverse—the writer's questioning of the answer.

Our son, Ben, in the six months between his graduation from Vassar as a fine-arts major and his reporting date for active duty as a lieutenant of Marines, held four jobs at once and lived, in exchange for work, in a tiny trailer where, to make a sketch, he had to prop his pad on the sink and crouch or sit before this uneasy easel. Since the plumbing, when we visited, was frozen, his art did not block his access to running water. Judy and I often speculated about his days and nights in the trailer, and I had some thoughts about his emotions, and I had gathered some images as I watched Judy's face while she crouched in his trailer with this tall, broad man who had been our baby—who didn't know it but still was—and whose lot we wished to improve but—because we honored his wish to be independent, and to survive heavy blows we thought he thought he deserved to endure—could not.

You could say of my speculations and my impressions of Judy that they were my answers. I carried them in my notebook and in my mind until, about six years later, as we were driving behind a school bus, the question—an arena useful for the application of those stored stimuli—appeared. The bus stopped and so did we. A small boy of nine or so, wearing a backpack, stepped down from the bus and strode to a roadside motel consisting of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

eight cabins that was surely abandoned. He marched, holding a key, to the white-painted cabin on which, in black letters, was painted the word OFFICE. He turned his key, and he went inside.

I said to Judy, "What do you—"

"Don't," she said. "Do not start. He lives there with his parents. They run the motel. It's fine. It's all all right."

"No," I said, "it's deserted, defunct. Nobody lives there. The kid lives *alone*."

At first I wondered why he did. But then I wrote about why he did, for I had found the question for which my answer mattered. I had found a context for my mental baggage, hauled scraping behind me for those six years. A story began to grow—about a small kid who lived alone in an abandoned motel, across the road from a large kid who lived alone in a tiny trailer. It is called "Domicile," and it permits those two characters to converse in dialogue and to speak imagistically to each other in metaphoric ways—about lost kids, solitaries; about homes that are and are not homes—ways that, if I did my work right, would say what otherwise cannot be said.

Ben lived and lives his life, and I poached on it even as I lay sleepless because of the conditions in which he was living; but, surely, he conducted his days and nights without any intention to perform metaphors for his needful father. Nor, I think, was my own father performing for me when he took me to say good-bye to my grandfather, Sam Busch, who lay dying in a nursing home on Coney Island Avenue in Brooklyn in 1954.

On my grandfather's night table was the wallet made of plastic and rimmed with punched holes through which I had laced a flat plastic cord. My father studied his sleeping father and picked up the wallet. He looked inside, examined the two or three one-dollar bills he found, and shook his head. I could not understand his expression. He was alone with what he had discovered. And then he took from the navy blue jacket of his excellent Brooks Brothers suit his own black leather billfold. He extracted from it, without counting, all of his folding money, and he inserted it into my grandfather's wallet.

I am certain that he never thought he was creating a metaphoric moment in which something was said in spite of its being impossible to say and, doubtless, unknown to the man who said it. I am also certain that I had no conscious understanding of what I witnessed. But, because I was genetically aimed and culturally conducted toward being a writer, and because something in or of me knew this, and recognized in the room filled by generations and the shallow breathing of an old man that what I had witnessed was a matter of importance, I kept it. I was thirteen when it occurred, and I wrote it several times every year from my twenty-first year through to my thirty-second. By then, I had become a father; my life was important, it felt, because of fatherhood, and that condition supplied me with several situations that created a context in which to join my parenthood to the event I had witnessed because of my childhood. I had found the right question with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

which to honor—maybe to celebrate—the answer I had lived with, and so I wrote the story called "Tax" at last, as well as I would write it.

If the metaphor available to me as a becoming writer and then as a young writer who struggled and as a young husband and father who struggled could be summarized, spelled out—as a pronounceable truth, as what students and our parents and our children insist upon calling "the message" of the story—then it would not be a metaphor worthy of the efforts I know writers labor to supply to their career; nor would it be worthy of the reader who is inviting me to enter her consciousness and stamp with my writer's boots all over a life's private pain as I try to make something in my life feel essential to something in hers.

Here's what I did: I succeeded, and I failed. I would like to point out the failure because it is a nice one, pleasantly and perhaps even movingly written, but more useful to us, in this context, than it will prove, I suspect, to any readers of a book called *Domestic Particulars,* in which the product of eleven years' trying, a story called "Tax," is collected.

As I said, I had become a father and it had occurred to me, or it had evolved in me, that the story could be told from the point of view of the father seeing his own father off into death. The parents are together in this story, as they were not in the event I actually witnessed; the son I was in actuality is here named Harry, and the father in the story has just repeated—as fathers in stories I attempted were to repeat for eleven years—the transfer of money from his billfold to his father's paltry wallet. For the first time in the writing of the story, the father tells it. He speaks of reaching for his son when they are outside the place in which the grandfather is dying:

> I reach for him but he's at the edge of the street, away from us. . . . He dances slowly around, around, a chubby spotted discus-hurler winding up beneath the sallow lights of the nursing home windows. He stops, his own brown plastic wallet in his hand, and weaves as if he's dizzy. I call, "Harry!"
>
> He says nothing. I can't see his face. He turns again to the street and spins again, sails his wallet into the moonless night above the traffic coming on, above the pallid light that leans from windows in the nursing home, up to the night as if its blackness were a sea his wallet dropped to from enormous heights. And the wallet is gone, Harry has staggered to sit on the curb beside the traffic, next to my overturned brief case, palms on his knees and his elbows cocked, his head leaning down as if he looks from his heights to the sea.

It is lovely, in certain ways, I think: the heroic set of the acne-stained, chunky adolescent as he sets about undoing time; the writer's assertion of "great heights" in the shallow streets of Brooklyn; the repeating and therefore sustaining of that conceit from the start to the end of the paragraph; and of course the metaphoric value asserted for the boy's wallet. He prays with it that he will not have to effect the transfer his father con-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ducted; he tells his father of his love; he tries—as all his life he must fail—to challenge death.

It is, as I said, nice. It is neat. It is absolutely sayable, repeatable, teachable, learnable. It is, in fact, not an artful metaphor precisely because it so clearly says what it says—while serious fiction writers strive to "say" in their metaphors what in fact *cannot,* really, in other words be said.

So it becomes a lovely gesture, that sailing-away of the wallet containing—my goodness!—money. *Time is money,* I managed to say, for all my poetic striving. Does that not make me one with General Motors, or, say, any random selection of three silver-haired, pink-faced, handsomely wardrobed Bush administration attendees of meetings about the business of business?

A gesture that does not prove true; a pantomime, with exaggerated lip movements and gestural clues for the audience; a reductive translation of act into summary sentences: I started out to bear witness, and to celebrate my father's humanity and my own admiration for him, I hauled that answer behind me while searching for its question, and I concluded—nineteen years after the event, eleven years after the first effort to write it—by creating a sweet, probably not memorable, moment of indelible sentimentality. The chances are good, I think, that what I saw as the appropriate question for the answer that haunted me was nothing more than a young father's awed, sudden awareness that he was next in line to die. Probably, I was impelled to write "Tax" as I did, and to see that version as the solution to my writing problem, because it seemed to enable me to put down the heavy, rusted chain affixed to the fictive answer; I was tired of bearing that particular load of death, and I wished to rest. That is why energy is as important to writers as talent. When we rest, we might surrender. The career, we need to remember, is a *job,* not an accomplishment.

What I did was mistake the celebration of my self—father, next to die, etc.—for what ought to have been the story's obligation: the honoring of the two *other* fathers in the room. And what I did, I think, was make the mistake of seeing the solution to the writing problem as more important than what I was writing *about.* I honored the art of fiction—no, the effort to make artful fiction—and not the reason I write, or the reason I *should* write: to locate a language beyond translation, a metaphor as powerful as prayer, with which to acknowledge the otherness of the world I have witnessed and experienced.

So in "Tax" I failed handsomely, I daresay, using a father's voice for what had begun as a son's experience. Whereas in "Domicile," a long story in the collection *Don't Tell Anyone,* I worked in the voice of a son to tell about what had started as the experience of a father. There was Ben, waiting after college to begin to serve in the Marines, living in the tiny trailer, dissatisfied with his achievements, and very brave (I continue to assert) in his strivings. And that so-called answer collided, six years later, with Judy's and my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

glimpse of a boy getting down from a school bus and entering an apparently abandoned motel.

I wrote the story in the voice of the young man. He conducts an affair with the sad, exciting daughter of the owner of the estate on which he works—fathers can dream wild dreams through their sons, can they not? And he notices the boy in the motel across the road. And he tells us this:

> The light of the cabin across the road was a yellow that verged on palest amber, and it wavered almost as a candle would. I'd have bet that he was using kerosene, and I worried for him, thinking of the fumes, thinking of the flame. . . . There he was at his place, and there I was at mine. [The narrator makes the metaphoric connection early, then. But he goes on to examine it:] Not a night to be a kid and living alone, I thought.
>
> It did not take a genius . . . to make the point. I knew which kid I was feeling sorrier for.

I believe that, if I had been writing this story twenty years before, I would have been tempted just to make the connection about youngsters alone on their own and in trouble. It is possible that I would have found evocative ways of gesturing toward the analogy and then have worked to close the story down. I am pleased to see that I went on, however, and got past the establishment of the parallel and sought to explore the characters as individuals—I forced my character to think, to examine, and to act as much as he could on what he concluded. So that they meet, through the efforts of David, the older fellow, as he is building a wall on the estate where he works, while the small boy, on a Saturday morning, is tempted across the road to watch him.

> When I looked up from the second [wheelbarrow] load of stone, the kid was on my side of the county road, and he was watching me.
>
> "I guess you're allowed to cross the road," I said. "Your mother lets you do that? Your father?"
>
> He said, "Traffic here is surprisingly light."
>
> "Yes, it is."
>
> "Surprisingly light."
>
> "Yes. There isn't very much of it at all."
>
> "No," he said, moving his arms, "and you don't see a great deal of commercial traffic, do you? I would say it's mostly residential."
>
> "That's what I would say too," I said. I was on my knees, and they were growing cold, but I was afraid that I would startle him if I rose.
>
> "So how's school?"
>
> "School is a responsibility," he said. "Some things—you just soldier on. Do you know that expression?"
>
> "I think I've heard it used," I said. "And that's what you do on schooldays?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

You soldier on?"

He nodded.

"You don't like it, though."

"Oh, I don't mind," he said. "It's what I'm supposed to do, so I do it. School's all right. Are you a college student?"

"No," I said, "but I used to be."

"What exactly are you?"

"I'm the handyman," I said. "I do the chores. . . ."

"Like building a fence," he said.

"This is going to be a wall, actually. You can *use* it as a fence, but it's a wall."

"How do you know the difference?"

"Well, *I* know because I'm building it. You'll know because I told you."

"And I might tell someone else," he said. "So *they* would know." His lips looked swollen, his skin seemed almost blue beneath its pallor. His hands were broad, with long fingers, and he kept returning them to the pockets of his coat. "So if it keeps a person out, it acts like a fence. But it's a wall."

"This baby is nothing but wall," I said.

And then the conversation is directed by the older boy to this:

"I hope you don't mind my noticing," I said, "but I really couldn't help it. There being so little traffic around here to look at. I've seen you leave for school."

"Bus 26."

"And I've seen you come home on it."

"Well, it's my bus," he said. "Number 26."

"Yeah. No, I was wondering, when you get home from school is there anyone around to say hello? Or goodbye when you, you know, start to soldier on?"

His face was almost purple, the blush coming in over that milky skin with blue beneath it. "Nobody's neglecting me," he said.

And the conversation goes on, and so does the older boy's concern. In fact, I think the point is that further motion: the story goes some distance toward exploring the older boy's acknowledgment of what you and I might call a metaphorical relationship between the two kids on their own. The story is about a good deal else—the older David's love affair, his situation in the trailer in the woods, his relationship to his parents and to a college girlfriend who has left him, his wish to become an artist, his pleasure in building structures, his need to endure rigors, if not punishment, because of his sense that he has failed—and it is also about the appearance and disappearance of that small boy. The story exists for more than the metaphor that occurred when my answer met my question; and the metaphor is far more complicated than a mere notation of a parallel between two boys, at different ages, living lonely lives.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Domicile," I am suggesting, survives its author's writing it; the story is about more than me, and about more than my regard for my son, and about more than what it took to get it written. If each quality I have named can be a criterion, "Tax" must be seen, according to each of them, to have failed.

Let me tell you one more story. We are in a church in upstate New York because a fourteen-month-old boy suddenly became ill and then died. A lot of people take turns at talking to those assembled there, and what they say, I keep thinking, can make little difference to the family of the child. Several clerics are present, and what they say seems to me at best irrelevant because, through the exercise of tired language about an unapproachable subject, among the flowers and among the musical chords, among the people who walk to the chancel and who leave it, near those who weep and near those who almost do not weep, always, to the left of the congregation and roughly at shoulder height, slanted on its bier, there is the baby's coffin.

It is painted white, and it is very, very small. It is fastened to white poles or rods that extend from its base before it and behind. And it is tilted, as if to show us what's inside. The coffin is sealed. But we know what it contains. And it seems to me, as I cannot help but simultaneously participate and observe, that the coffin grows larger and larger during the talk, the necessary and maybe useful, but also maybe useless and even, some of it, empty talk that some of the living might require in order to believe that they can fashion ways of surviving what the coffin, silent in the music and the words, does say.

And then, as if they have been speaking in order to forestall what they next must do, but now cannot help doing, the survivors fall silent. The music, too, has stilled. The church is so quiet, you might think that we each have agreed to hold our breath. Or, you might think, the small, white box, growing larger as we stare at it, has silenced us.

And then six big men, with reluctance, approach the box as if they fear that the death it contains will spread to them. It is as if, knowing that when they do as they must, they will remind us, agree on behalf of everyone there and, in fact, on behalf of everyone who is anyplace else, that, as this baby disappears beneath the earth, death possesses us all.

They do their duty. They shuffle to the box. They are awkward, perhaps because of its size. How do six large men get a grip on anything so little? They lift it by the rods, of course, the two in front and the two in back; the two men in the middle get their shoulders under the box containing the baby, and everyone takes the weight.

Here is what happens: the knees of the pallbearers buckle.

I can see their legs falter. They are sizable men, and they are lifting a very small weight, and their legs are failing beneath them. We know why, of course. The weight is immense. It is that of an actual child who has died, and who remains real in the church and in the tiny coffin. But it has also,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in that doleful moment, become a metaphor. The death, the ceremony, the needs of the mind in its agonies, have transformed a life that seemed for many, if not most, in the church, to be only—because the little life ran out—a matter, now, of words; and suddenly this child is given real substance, the sense of weight that death and love require us to feel. So strong men—thinking of the baby, instructing themselves not to drop the box, telling themselves how to get him down the steps while holding the box and not stumbling—these men feel a pressure of weight that the box surely does and of course does not contain.

Much of its heaviness is inside them. They have apprehended the metaphoric truth of the moment and cannot help responding. As they do, they remind us—if one can be cold enough to agree to learn from such terrible loss, and a writer, really, must feel both the chilliness *and* deep emotion this story is about—that writing, this career, is concerned with the sacred.

Though I seem to declaim liturgically, I am talking about utter practicality: what a veteran writer performs, at last, because it works. The search, in a career (as I am defining it), is for pieces that fit, for startling circumstances—caresses of fact by imagination—that alter what and how we see. I have in mind the transformation of a liquid and a solid one combines in what becomes a supersaturated solution: suddenly, now, they are crystals—all the old stuff, but changed into something else. I have in mind the satisfying fall into place of colored shapes that make a new design in a kaleidoscope you turn. There's beauty, or satisfaction, available, but it is practical: it performs work that makes changes. In "Tax," it was pretty, and it was *im*practical, whereas "Domicile"—any story that works would do the same—swung into place, at last, like a handsome, heavy door clicking closed.

Let's think again—I cannot forget—about the small coffin, the large men, their weakened knees. I carry that in the consciousness of a man who is like other men, the memory of someone who fears time and who mourns the toll it takes. I also carry the coffin as a writer carries those answers I've been speaking about; I am tempted by the fiction writer's need to use that pain—other people's, and my own. Now, one would be—one should be—ashamed to haul the terrible Marley's-chain of this story behind him, so dark an answer, only to wed it to a situation, a question, that is not worthy of those parents' agony. But what situation is? Can the end of a "killing" affair be suitable? But this is about a baby who is *dead.* What, then, can one mean by "killing" when he looks at the eyes of the mother of that child? So suddenly it is not enough—is it?—to be talented, or haunted, or driven by one's calling. One is bearing the weight of the child, and it drives the femur down through the patella and on into the tibia, splintering bone and tearing ligaments loose.

I wonder if that was not what John Gardner meant when he wrote *On Moral Fiction.* He was already resented by many of his peers, for he had gone from obscurity—a writer in the academy unable to publish his novels—to be-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

come famous as a scholar of medieval literature, an inspirational instructor, a long-haired, ruddy motorcycle rider, the author of the best-selling *Grendel* and *The King's Indian, Nickel Mountain, October Light* (he published twenty-seven books), a man whose career was about the spiritual quest *and* the handsome advances. His books on writing—*The Art of Fiction* and *On Becoming a Novelist*—are permanent because so useful. Although many of his peers came, grudgingly, to forgive him his success, fledgling writers adored him, for he was generous about reading their work and he offered real line-by-line, page-by-page assistance. But few writers, I think, forgave him for *On Moral Fiction.* Parts of this book made Gardner sound like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn throwing Tolstoy's voice from behind the samovar. Always bearlike in appearance, he rose to his hind legs in his book and spoke what he thought of as unassailable truths about serious writing:

> Art builds temporary walls against life's leveling force, the ruin of what is splendidly unnatural in us, consciousness, the state in which not all atoms are equal. In corpses, entropy has won; the brain and the toenails have equal say. Art asserts and reasserts those values which hold off dissolution, struggling to keep the mind intact and preserve the city. . . . Art rediscovers, generation by generation, what is necessary to humanness.

While the book is actually a diatribe against contemporary criticism—in his snarls about and resentments of second-rate critics, he was years ahead of his time—Gardner defined the writing he thought to matter, and then he did what most writers would be too timid or polite to do: he said whose work counted and whose did not. Only a bear of a man, and a bear as smart as Gardner, could think to categorize his peers in this way and survive the saying. He was in everybody's gunsights after that. But apparently he thought that real criticism, such as he yearned for, must be specific. Apparently he thought he had to list his peers and elders, ranging from Donald Barthelme through John Cheever and past John Updike. He thought, then, that he needed to add this: "I suspect that what I've typed above is a list of inflated reputations. Some on the list will die quickly, of pure meanness—[Katherine Anne] Porter, Coover, and Gaddis—and some will die of intellectual blight, academic narrowness, or fakery—Pynchon, Updike (or most of his work), and Barth." He probably even saw, in the dangers of such public statement, a real advantage: attention, and lots of it. He was a star, and he wished to be. I suspect that he would have admired Oprah Winfrey—surely, he'd have admired her ability to draw the spotlight—and he would have frowned at the attention she drew to kitsch. For in his fiction, Gardner was about nothing but art. And he would have happily told you, I think, which of her selections were unadulterated junk and which came with a frosting of real feeling and, maybe, like a plump, buried raisin, an idea.

Gardner aimed to demand criticism that could influence the writers of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

our time. He did not attack, I think, only to feel the pleasures of ferocity. He had in mind what he called "True art," which he saw as a force that "clarifies life, establishes models of human action, casts nets toward the future, carefully judges our right and wrong directions, celebrates and mourns." He was unafraid. He drew down lightning. And he was struck. For he had named the names, had denigrated powerful, successful writers. (I have taken the coward's path, attacking the only writer I can punish with impunity: myself.)

He wished to instruct us that literary art "does not sneer or giggle in the face of death, it invents prayers and weapons." He wrote with death in mind, and he is gone—killed on a motorcycle in the Endless Mountains of Pennsylvania—and everyone else is going. We are all a step from somebody's grave. What I have been saying about the writing of fiction, an echo maybe of Gardner, concerns our forced obedience to physical laws. It is about our desire to rebel against them, and about our inability to fly that high. Time works in us and upon us, *now*. You, and the children in these short stories of mine, the upstate New York boy named John Gardner who became a burly man and writer exemplary to a nation, and everyone else who is beautiful—look around you—is starting to sag to earth. It is about gravity. It is about time.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at the intersection of law and life

THE BOLD NEW MAGAZINE

legalaffairs

Incisive, informative, irreverent—for nonlawyers and lawyers, *Legal Affairs* combines sharp-eyed storytelling and dynamic legal analysis in essays and comments, criticism and profiles, reporting and agendas for legal reform.

In *Legal Affairs*' Premier Issue:

- **Security vs. Liberty:** Emily Bazelon explores how Chief Justice Aharon Barak has transformed Israeli justice.
- **The Trial of the Millennium:** Christopher Buckley offers an excerpt from his comic novel *No Way To Treat A First Lady*.
- **Cybercrime:** Brendan Koerner details the ingenious ruse that lured a Russian hacker into the hands of the FBI.
- **TV Judges:** Dashka Slater sounds off on the curious spectacle of television courtrooms.
- **French Scandal:** David Ignatius reports on a corruption case that rocked France's elite.

On Newsstands Now

www.legalaffairs.org • 800-406-5615

A Magazine of Yale Law School

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE UNCERTAIN ART

Lightning on My Mind

SHERWIN B. NULAND

Plus ça change,
plus c'est la même chose.

Or perhaps not. Some things *do* change, and in unexpected ways. Even though I'd prepared myself for what I was going to see on that recent morning, it was still disturbing to come face to face with it. All four patients were sitting dull and motionless on a long bench backed against the far wall of the psychiatric clinic's holding area, oblivious to one another's presence and to anyone else's. I hadn't expected them to notice me entering, but they also seemed totally unaware of the two chattering middle-aged nurses abustle within a few feet of them, riffling through charts, unlocking medication cabinets, laying out syringes and intravenous tubing—doing all the little jobs of starting up the early-morning activities of an outpatient clinic in a large urban hospital.

Three of the bench's occupants were women, one in each decade of life from the late thirties to near sixty. The older two were frumpily dressed in unpressed housecoats and worn sneakers. But the third woman wore a neat skirt and blouse and good shoes with a bit of heel. She had made an attempt to comb her long, black hair, but it only added pallor to her wan, expressionless face. Sitting there with her body pressed against the arm of the bench, she might have been the melancholy wife of the gaunt, fortyish man slouching on the opposite end, separated from her by the older two and an impenetrable gulf of silence. She was no one's wife, however. Like the other three, she was a severely depressed outpatient, awaiting an electroshock treatment.

Of course, the four were not nearly as unresponsive as they appeared. There was in fact a firestorm going on in their brains, but none of it was directed to anything outside their own heads. All internal and only partly conscious, this firestorm left no energy for visible emotion or any but the most essential movements. All the people in that room were embroiled in a private war; they were battling mental chaos, fear, and the relentless taunting of silent accusers who denounced them as worthless.

I have spoken to many severely depressed men and women, and all of them tell me similar things. During the worst of their illness, they are too fully absorbed in the struggle with their clamoring demons to have anything left for the world. They are without strength or resilience. What is far worse, they are without hope. The leaden heaviness of hearts burdened with the loss of a future and the belittling of a past bows their heads and bends their backs. The forlorn sight I witnessed that morning was the face of despair.

Yet all of this is almost always supposed to be cured, miraculously, by a few jolts of electricity to the brain. The undeniable—and largely unexplainable—clinical result of electroshock therapy is that the symptoms of a great majority of deeply depressed patients disappear entirely following a series of treatments, usually not exceeding six or eight. No one has yet been able to figure out the precise mechanism by which this peculiar form of therapy does its astonishing work.

As early as the sixteenth century, the Swiss medical innovator Paracelsus was treating lunacy by inducing convulsions with oral doses of tincture of camphor. Over the years, many other doctors followed suit, attempting

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to shock people out of their symptoms. Because there were some successes, the methods persisted throughout that long period when efficacy was far more important than explanation. Then, in the 1930s, a group of Italian psychiatrists observed that some of their epileptic patients who were also depressed became free of their mental symptoms when they went through a period of particularly frequent convulsions. Concluding that there is some biological incompatibility between seizures and mental illness, the psychiatrists began looking for a patient so seriously psychotic that a failed experiment in electrically induced fits could not possibly worsen his condition. But first they had to satisfy themselves that the current they planned to use for the induction of the seizures would not be lethal. This they did by paying a visit to a Rome slaughterhouse where pigs were dispatched after being rendered unconscious with a standard current. None of the animals succumbed to the electricity, and the researchers were encouraged to seek out an appropriate human subject.

Their opportunity came one day in April 1938, when the police brought in a disheveled and unidentifiable thirty-nine-year-old man who had been found wandering through the Rome railway station, mumbling and sometimes shouting gibberish. The rest of the story, as described by an eyewitness, is worth recording for posterity. After observing the potential patient for a fortnight, the physicians decided that he fit the criteria for their ideal candidate. They began their human experiment with some trepidation, administering a dose of only 70 volts of current for two-tenths of a second. Even that small amount threw their subject into a brief grand mal seizure. After the final spasm, he forced his head upward against the restraints that held him, and shouted angrily and obscenely, "*Che cazzo fai?!*" This was the first lucid sentence he had uttered since being brought to the hospital. The doctors were initially worried by the force of the convulsive response—both the physical and the verbal part—but, relieved that they had not killed their subject, they eventually felt justified in raising the current to 110 volts for half a second. After a single jolt, the patient immediately became well oriented to his surroundings and began speaking sensibly, sans obscenities. After ten more treatments he seemed fully cured. Later on he suffered a relapse, but the doctors were nevertheless elated at the outcome of their experiment, since even a temporary improvement held the promise of more enduring relief for patients less sick. The Italians and numerous other psychiatrists were able to confirm the salubrious results in other patients, many of whom remained well. So-called electroconvulsive therapy, or ECT, became the rage. It was thought that the current somehow modified thinking patterns, or perhaps obliterated pathological memories; but the biochemical basis of the treatment's success remained a mystery.

Nowadays it is known that a cascade of neurotransmitters—with names like serotonin, dopamine, norepinephrine, and the like—is released into the brain's circulation at the time of the shock. How this might have a lasting effect on mental functioning is still undetermined. The one certainty is that electroshock therapy usually does what is expected of it. After decades in which, for a variety of reasons, the therapy had fallen into disuse and even disrepute, it is again being widely utilized in the treatment of various forms of depression, both neurotic and psychotic, that do not respond to medications or a reasonable period of psychotherapy. The results have been remarkably good. The four people I saw sitting on the outpatient bench were staking their futures on that promise.

It was time to start work. One of the two nurses lightly touched the arm of the younger woman. She rose slowly, managing a small smile as though finally sensing that she was not alone in the holding area. Nurse and patient walked wordlessly into the adjoining room, where an anesthesiologist had just set up his equipment. Beside him stood the psychiatrist, a cheerful and very attractive woman about the same age as the patient. She took a step forward and the two hugged warmly, as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

though they were close friends. And friendship, in fact, is precisely the right term for the relationship that had developed between them. The patient was about to undergo her fourth treatment, and was showing enough improvement to begin paying attention to her appearance once more. In the loosening grip of pathological apathy, she had on her last visit asked the psychiatrist for advice about grooming. They were now sisters of a sort, and there was genuine tenderness in their embrace.

But the scrub-suited anesthesiologist was new to the young woman, and he introduced himself as she wearily drew her thin, taut body onto the gurney. After he had inserted an intravenous line into her left forearm, the psychiatrist gently affixed a wired electrode to each temple, having first taken care to smear it generously with conductive jelly to avoid burning at the points of contact with the skin. Electroencephalographic monitoring leads were then placed on the patient's forehead, and one of the nurses attached the electrocardiogram and a blood-pressure apparatus. The members of the medical team kept up a steady stream of small talk to distract the patient.

When everything was in place, the anesthesiologist injected a dose of brevital (a barbiturate so named because it acts with great brevity) into the intravenous line, followed by the muscle relaxant anectine, to induce a virtual paralysis of the entire body. The patient promptly fell into a coma-like sleep. The anesthesiologist now placed a bite block between the woman's teeth to avoid any possibility that she might clamp down on her tongue during the ECT. After filling his patient's lungs with an extra load of oxygen to sustain her during an anticipated brief period of respiratory arrest, the anesthesiologist nodded to the others.

All was now ready. The psychiatrist pressed a button on the complex multi-dialed console controlling the electrical charge to be delivered, and the current coursed into the sleeping woman's brain. It passed from one temple to the other for a period of twenty-five seconds. I watched carefully for any evidence of convulsive activity or muscle spasm, but all I saw was a sudden upward turning and then twitching of the feet. Had I not been paying attention to the encephalogram and cardiogram, I would hardly have known that anything unusual was going on inside the patient's still body.

I was momentarily alarmed to see that the woman's heart abruptly arrested for a period of two seconds as the current began streaming through her brain. But it gradually resumed its normal rhythm, within no more than ten beats, although the blood pressure—which had leaped to 240/120—stayed high the entire time. From their previous normally symmetric appearance, the brain waves being recorded on the electroencephalogram took on a spindly shape recognizable as the pattern of a seizure. This was sustained as long as the current flowed. But other than the spasmodic movements of the feet, there was no convulsion.

As the treatment drew to a close, the spasm of the feet turned into a brief series of rhythmic jerks, but that was the only visible evidence that one hundred joules of electricity had traveled through the woman's brain. In all other ways, she looked at this point like any healthy patient undergoing anesthesia for a minor surgical procedure. She awoke, was helped from the table, and seemed fully aware of her surroundings.

Having assured the doctors that she felt well, the patient was escorted to the corridor, where a friend was waiting to take her home. Scarcely ten minutes had elapsed since she was called from her place on the bench. She had not been required to change into a hospital gown. To judge from the way she looked, she might have just arisen from a short nap on the gurney—a power nap, so to speak.

The other patients, in turn, were led into the room and given their treatments. All responded just as the younger woman had. Checking the large clock on the wall, I noted that completing all four of the treatments had taken less than an hour. I was told that the patients might experience a period of amnesia covering the fifteen or twenty minutes before and after the session, but otherwise no mental aberrations were to be expected.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was as simple as that. After more sessions like this—perhaps as few as three or four—the patient would become all that she or he had been before depression stole the real world away. The psychiatrist told me of one patient who had gone to his law office and worked on briefs after his fourth and fifth treatments. His early-morning visits to the clinic were only short interruptions of his gradually normalizing day.

How different all this is from the first time that I, as a third-year medical student in 1953, saw a patient undergoing ECT. She was confined to a huge state hospital, and so few even marginally effective psychotropic drugs were available then that electroconvulsive therapy played a major role in the treatment of the seriously ill. In those days, the onset of convulsion was a moment of high drama and some danger, because there were no muscle relaxants to prevent the massive seizures induced by unmodulated electroshock.

On that morning half a century ago, some twenty patients were assembled in a dingy, poorly lit hallway lined with parallel wooden benches. Those not bundled up in robes and pajamas were wearing drab, ill-fitting clothing. All but two or three of the men were unshaven and uncombed. Most of the women appeared considerably older than the age given on their hospital charts. Even the youngest among them—two girls in their late teens—looked as if they had just stepped out of a Walker Evans photograph of the joyless wives of Alabama sharecroppers.

Though some of the patients were far enough along in their treatment to display real interest in their surroundings, most were as uncommunicative and dispirited as the people I would see in the outpatient clinic almost five decades later. As their names were called, they were taken into a small adjoining room, where a short, heavyset man with a thick Hispanic accent awaited them, accompanied by six powerfully built young attendants dressed in rumpled white uniforms. The routine on the morning I visited hadn't changed since its introduction into the hospital shortly after the great Italian successes—though it would begin to alter with the development of muscle relaxants only a few years later.

The heavy door of the soundproof chamber would be slammed shut, and one of the muscular young men would guide the patient into a supine position on the narrow treatment table. When I entered with the middle-aged woman I had been following on the ward, I realized that the older man with the accent was the psychiatrist who was to administer both the anesthetic and the ECT. Considering the grim surroundings, he spoke to his patient with surprising gentleness as he inserted the IV for the first of what would be a series of perhaps ten treatments. But she barely responded to his words or to the prick of the needle piercing her pale skin. Even when the young aides surrounded her and applied thick leather restraints to her extremities and waist, she lay perfectly still. After injecting the drug to put her to sleep, the psychiatrist placed a wired electrode on each temple, but there was no electrocardiogram, no electroencephalogram, and no monitoring of vital signs—only a mouth block, which was merely a tongue depressor wrapped in layers of tape.

The electrode wires led to a small wooden box, perhaps four by six inches in size, plugged directly into a wall outlet—the source of the unmodified 110-volt current to be used. Having turned the box's control dial to the setting marked "medium" (the other choices were "high" and "low"), the psychiatrist then delivered a powerful blast of electricity that threw the patient into massive convulsions of every muscle in her body, resembling an extreme form of grand mal epileptic seizure in which head, arms, and legs strained repeatedly upward against the leather straps and the strong hands of the six orderlies holding the patient down. In spite of their strenuous attempts to prevent it, she seemed about to leap upward off the table with every jolting thrust of her trunk. Her face turned blue with the effort; foamy spittle dribbled from the corners of her mouth, while her body spasmodically attempted to jerk itself double at the waist restraint, like a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

long, thin jackknife trying to snap shut over and over again. To a twenty-two-year-old medical student, it was a horrible sight.

Though the table was padded, it was not unknown for the violent thrashing about to result in crushed vertebrae or fractured extremities. Since elderly people with fragile bones were especially prone to such serious complications, the doctors were reluctant to treat them. As a consequence, the wards were full of aging, severely depressed men and women who passed their last years in abject desolation because nothing could be done for them.

The patient awakened slowly. Dazed, confused, and glassy-eyed, she had no idea where or even who she might be. After a few minutes, I helped her up—wobbly as she still was—and clumsily half-walked, half-dragged her past the forlorn group waiting outside. I then took her back to the ward in a wheelchair. Within a short time she fell into a deep sleep, lasting about three hours, and awoke amnesic for everything that had occurred in her entire life. By the late afternoon, most, but not all, of her memory had returned. In two or three days she would be taken back for another treatment. Each time, the unrecoverable part of her memory loss grew greater; each time, her depression lessened. ECT was a difficult and dangerous form of therapy in those days, but despite its devastating side effects, it worked.

It works better today, as I witnessed on that morning in the outpatient clinic. Electroshock therapy is in the midst of a renaissance, but its associations with the grim scenes of yesteryear still linger. It is time for the fear to be dispersed: we are not dealing with *la même chose.* Having returned in twenty-first-century clothing, ECT has taken its place among the growing number of biomedical wonders. No longer to be viewed as a last resort or dreaded as an agent of psychic destruction, it is truly a modern miracle.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

JOURNAL

Book Tour

LEIF ENGER

October 2, 2001. Boston. Next trip I'll bring fewer clothes.

Then the suitcase will have more room for books, which have relentlessly joined me along the way: books about animals, books about acoustic blues, books about romantic or embittered outlaws, books about books. The suitcase is constructed of an armor-like cloth described by the manufacturer as "ballistic," meaning, I guess, that it will turn bullets—which seems like overkill, although from the number of similarly outfitted travelers I saw in the airport, you'd think we got shot at daily.

There have been no aggressors on this tour, but there have been a great number of admirably determined book lovers advocating volumes I must not miss. My suitcase now lists to port. It should be named after a woman and struck with champagne. I dread no imagined burst of ballistics, only the quiet strain of the incipient hernia. This is the unforeseen kick of the book tour: to visit a series of fascinating stores—the fusty, the elegant, the caffeinated—stuffed not only with books but with booksellers so zealous that leaving with empty hands is impossible. Here are some of the titles I've acquired in the last four days:

The Zygote Chronicles, by Suzanne Finnamore
The Country Blues, by Samuel Barclay Charters
The Ordinary Seaman, by Francisco Goldman
Things You Get for Free, by Michael McGirr
Wavemaker II, by Mary-Beth Hughes
Wildwood Boys, by James Carlos Blake
The Siege, by Helen Dunmore
Pack of Two, by Caroline Knapp
Death at the Priory, by James Ruddick
Love That Dog, by Sharon Creech

Some of these are hardcovers, some paperbacks, and several are "advance reader copies"—a perk of being escorted around Boston by the electric and shoot-from-the-hip Peg O'Donnell, a dog fancier (she was responsible for insinuating *Love That Dog* into my suitcase) and book sales rep who's responsible for getting *Peace Like a River* into stores all over New England.

Last fall, after I'd spent sixteen years reporting for Minnesota Public Radio, a novel that had been growing a long time suddenly came ripe and sold, a happy shock delivering the prospect of Time Off; a long, peaceful Leave of Absence; possibly a Career Change—all dreamy terms rarely offered to reporters. The truth is that in all those years of newswriting, I rarely met a story that couldn't have been improved by the careful injection of fiction. Every reporter I know has at some time badly wanted to invent a source, goose a quote, or make up a tasty detail. You can't do it, plainly—you just want to. I'm not sure where other reporters put their forbidden inventions; for five years I stored mine in *Peace Like a River.*

Tonight I read at Tim Huggins's magnificent bookstore in the Boston suburb of Newtonville. Mr. Huggins, who learned the book trade in Mississippi before moving to Boston, looks nothing like his cuddly surname. He's the kind of long-maned, glowering patron of the arts who appears wholly capable of convincing you, by force if necessary, *to read what he tells you.* His place has no cappuccino, nor even very many square feet, but magnificent is

Leif Enger, a former reporter and producer for Minnesota Public Radio, kept the journal from which these entries are excerpted during a 10,000-mile promotional tour for *Peace Like a River,* a novel published last September by Atlantic Monthly Press. The entries appeared in somewhat different form on the Web site of Minnesota Public Radio.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the word, all right: the shelves are high and crammed; books are stacked shinglewise on the floor and the counter and atop computer monitors. This store could swallow you down as if you were Jonah, except you'd have a better time.

I started on September 29 in New York. I wondered how the New York readings would go; though *USA Today* and other papers have run stories on the New Patriotism of Shopping ("The economy needs my money more than I do," declared one allegiant consumer), the streets of Manhattan remain less than rambunctious. A calm exists, both worried and respectful.

Within sight of the rubble of the World Trade Center towers, a gentleman stepped from his jewelry store to hand out flyers for a Big Gem Sale to the perpetual crowd watching the cleanup. His heart wasn't in it, though, and no one seemed interested. So I was surprised to see audiences of encouraging size and warmth in New York, both at the Ariel Bookshop in upstate New Paltz, and at Barnes & Noble in the city. In both places, people used the word *re-emerge.* A man at B&N bought copies for his friends for Christmas. He was coming out of hibernation, he said, and boy, was he hungry: he actually snarled.

October 13–16. Minnesota to Portland.

Well, here's a change: this has become a driving tour, a decision forced by dwindling flight schedules since the September 11 disaster. Do I suddenly dread flying? Not at all. I dread standing in line for three hours under uniformed supervision for a connecting flight that may or may not really connect. After discussing this with Grove/Atlantic I decided to rent a car (actually a white Jeep Cherokee) and buy a road atlas. I really don't mind. You see different things from a rented Jeep than you do from a jet. You meet different people and use different muscles. And if something happens—as now seems possible—and commercial flights are grounded, you can turn the Jeep around and head for home.

It's a four-day drive from my home in Minnesota to Oregon (three-day for the desperate), and a worthwhile one if you've never known that certain pieces of country existed. For me there's been a lifelong white space between eastern Montana—where some of my cousins grew up and which seemed the outer edge of my family's driving limits—and the West Coast, a destination we thought of in terms of airplanes or Amtrak. Following are lessons learned about driving beyond the North Dakota Badlands.

1. Before you jump off the western rim of North Dakota, it's good to fuel up with a stop at the Book Corral in Medora, a tiny bookshop run by interesting and tireless people: interesting because their knowledge of western lore extends beyond their wide selection of books into the territory of legend and even of television (current inventory includes the complete episodes of *Rawhide* and *Gunsmoke* on VHS); tireless because they keep the store open year-round to late odd hours, even though Medora is a tourist town that closes most of its shutters by late September.

2. Interstates are fine. Though I've read as much Charles Kuralt as most, and agree that shunpiking is the virtuous way to see the country, there's no substitute for raw speed after you've looked at an atlas and computed the hours between Glendive and Missoula. Deadlines are the common thread between radio reporting and book touring: getting to a reading in Portland by October 20 isn't so different from getting a Mille Lacs script finished by week's end.

3. In autumn, expect winter between Bozeman and Butte. This eighty-mile stretch of freeway might be Montana's version of I-94 between Moorhead and Fergus Falls in Minnesota, a segment capable of brewing abrupt, heinous blizzards while surrounding landscapes sleep in the sun.

When I attended college at Moorhead State twenty years ago, it was so common to be stranded near Fergus that we all knew which truck stops served the best omelettes. I recalled this when the sun disappeared today just past Bozeman and the temperature dropped thirty degrees in twenty-one miles. And then the snow. I stopped to horse around in it and make a video for my kids, but this snow was no autumn novelty. It had ambitions.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In ten minutes, the traffic on I-90 slowed to thirty-five miles an hour and, as visibility failed, I became dependent for guidance on the taillights of a Lincoln Continental: an older model, a large, trustworthy automobile driven by a man in a slope-crowned cowboy hat such as Teddy Roosevelt wore during his ranching days in North Dakota. He stayed on the road, a true rough rider, and as we crawled toward Butte, the road turned slushy and the snowflakes came backlit by sun. We got into the city just as spring arrived. The Lincoln zipped away on a side street, and Butte was a town awash in snowmelt and people stepping outdoors to blink.

4. Idaho is like C. S. Lewis's enchanted wardrobe: a place of forested loveliness where anything might happen to those who stray off the path or, in this case, the interstate. Though the trees are majestic and throw shade like black felt, they're so relentless that my hands got damp before we climbed into the high desert of Washington State. Later, in Oregon, an interviewer wondered about this nervousness. It's not complicated: if someone were after me, I wouldn't be able to see him coming. The interviewer shook his head. "You approach it wrongly," he said. "Think how many places you can hide."

October 16, Portland.

Signed in Portland at 23rd Avenue Books, a small independent store, which is successful despite its proximity to Powell's, the lovely and famously large bookstore—a Portland landmark. Bob Maull, who owns 23rd, accomplishes this by knowing his customers and serving them his suggestions with humor underscored with the passion all great booksellers possess. Portland residents will tell you they read more books per capita than anyone else in the country. Powell's is one reason why; Bob Maull is another.

October 17, Bellingham.

Today it was up the Espresso Coast through Seattle, past Safeco Field, which emitted a dangerous glow of Mariners' Fever, to Bellingham. It's unfortunate to be on the road during the play-offs, though most years it wouldn't have mattered—the last time I cared about the ALCS was in 1991. But Seattle had such a brilliant season, winning 116, and the Yankees are so hideously good in the postseason, that I wanted to watch the games. It was disappointing to reach Bellingham too late to catch the end of Game One on television, but there was a fine crowd at Village Books for the evening reading, and they were easy to cheer up; all I had to say was, "Tomorrow's comeback day." Many repaid me, in fact, by smiling and nodding as I read from *Peace Like a River.* They laughed easily; they made kind remarks. This sort of thing is a hubris injection. You think: Why, they like it pretty well—yes, sir.

Anyone who's read the Book of Proverbs ("Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth") could've foretold trouble.

October 18, Seattle.

Tonight, the night of Game Two, found me at the picturesque Elliot Bay Bookstore. Elliot Bay is three blocks from Safeco Field, meaning that much of Seattle was close by and not thinking about books. Most people who parked near the store paid dearly for the privilege and walked straight to the ballpark muttering about revenge. Of the very few who chose fiction over the ballgame (see how ridiculous it sounds?), one was a faithful old friend from grade-school days, marooned by loyalty, and two others kept getting up and sneaking out and then back in. They were checking the score. In all, the Mariners had a worse night than I did; beaten again, their exiting fans were a chilled river of sorrow and dragging pennants that plugged the sidewalks for blocks. In front of a jewelry store, one diehard got fed up with the preponderant gloom: "Come on," he roared, "It's not over! It's only two games! Come on, you [wimps]! Get some spine!" The fellow had a fedora in his hand, held upside down, at arm's length. Nobody spoke to him or joined his tirade, but quite a few dropped in some change.

October 20, Sonoma.

I hadn't seen the Napa Valley since a visit to my elegant aunt and uncle more than twenty

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

years before. They took me to Point Reyes, where Sir Francis Drake landed with his grumbling crew; to the great redwood forest near San Francisco; and through Napa, with its miles of grapevines and its magnificent haciendas, farms like none I'd ever seen. What I remember is the liquid feel of the sunlight in vineyard country, and the exotic shimmer of ragtops scooting down the highway. This time around, it seemed less mysterious but just as lovely. I signed in Sonoma just after the annual Crush Festival, when the smell of grapes rolls through like a pleasant fog.

October 24, San Francisco.

At Rakestraw Books, readers were served eight kinds of appetizers unidentifiable to me.

October 30, Denver.

The Tattered Cover, Denver's famed bookstore, is so large you want to vanish for days in its stacks, with a staff so well read you rarely need the provided book-search computers. Years ago, the Tattered Cover commissioned portraits of every author who came for a signing. These hang in a wide hall next to the reading room. It's the only place you'll ever see a picture of Jon Hassler right next to one of Elvira, of late-night-movie fame.

Incidentally, one of the finest things about a book tour is the number of relatives who come out to see you. Tonight these included several I didn't know existed. It's like finding a fresh cheesecake in a refrigerator you were certain was empty. We shook hands, talked late, and took each other's pictures.

November 8, Raleigh, North Carolina.

Besides its Southern allure (the Biscuitville fast-food chain has the best grits I've encountered on the tour), Raleigh has Nancy Olson, who runs Quail Ridge Books with irresistible zeal. Among the considerable audience she brought out—for an author virtually no one here had heard of—were at least two local writers, an English teacher, and a number of college students who mentioned they were attending their first reading ever. These, under gentle grilling, admitted they'd come only because their humanities professor required it. The professor was nowhere to be seen.

November 14, Northfield, Minnesota.

Nearly the last stop—I have, at this writing, only three more scheduled signings, all nearby. But Northfield is always a treat, for its history alone. The reading was held in a dance studio a block from the bank unsuccessfully held up by the James and Younger gang.

A lot of people came, plus the studio boasts a mirrored wall that straightaway doubled the crowd. The bank, by the way, is a museum now, well worth your time, though it no longer displays the skeleton of the bandit Charlie Pitts—apparently there was some question whether the bones were really Charlie's. Then, too, the matter of good taste arose.

November 15, Aitkin, Minnesota.

It was simple at first, when I planned to fly; but then the tour changed to an epic drive (23 states in 33 days). Suddenly, in addition to readings and finding my way through strange cities, there were all these miles to drive—10,000, an average of more than 300 a day. Like freight pilots and musicians, I began to lose track of where I was, particularly when waking in the morning.

When I finally arrived at our dead-end road, under sunset skies, the beauty of a small farm in central Minnesota seemed easily the equal of anything offered in the 10,000 previous miles. Instead of confused, I wake up grateful, at first light. I know precisely where I am.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

· B O O K S ·

I was seventeen when it started. My family was on vacation in Maine, and one day we went on a nature walk led by a young man a few years older than I. Probably I wanted to get his attention—I'm sure I did—so I pointed to a flower and asked, "What's that?"

"Hmmm? Oh, just an aster," he said.

Was there a hint of a sniff as he turned away? There was! It was just an aster and I was just a total ignoramus! The tidal weight of my blithering ignorance was a thing I remember clearly, even now.

And I remember the aster. Its rays were a brilliant purple, its core a dense coin of yellow velvet. It focused light as a crystal will. It faced the sun, rigid with delight; it was the sun's echo.

REREADING

My Life with a Field Guide

DIANA KAPPEL-SMITH

Later that day, a book with a green cover lay on the arm of an Adirondack chair under an apple tree. It was the same volume that our guide had carried as he marched us through the woods. Everyone who had been on the walk had gone into the nature center for milk and cookies, and the book had been left there, by itself. It was a thing of power, as totemic in its way as an orb and scepter. In the thin summer shadow of the tree, quivering, like a veil—green on green on green—the book was revealed, and I reached for it. A FIELD GUIDE TO WILDFLOWERS—PETERSON & MCKENNY, its cover said. Its backside was ruled like a measuring tape, its inside was full of drawings of flowers. By the end of that week I had my own copy. I have it still.

Over the next several years this field guide would become my closest companion, a slice of worldview, as indispensable, finally, as eyes or hands. I didn't arrive at this intimacy right away, however. This wasn't going to be an easy affair for either of us. And—unlike the course of other love affairs—it was the start of our liaison that gave no pleasure at all.

I'll give you an example of how it went. After I'd owned the Peterson's for about a week, I went on a hike with some friends up a little mountain in Maine, taking the book along. Halfway up the mountain, there by the trailside was a yellow flower, a nice opportunity to take my new guide for a test drive. "Go on ahead!" I said to my hiking companions, "I'll be a minute . . . " Famous last words.

I had already figured out (intuitive, isn't it?) the business of the colored tabs. I turned in an authoritative way to the Yellow part and began to flip through. By the time the last of my friends had disappeared up the trail, I'd arrived at a page where things looked right. Five petals? Yes. Pinnate leaves? Whatever. Buttercup? There are, amazingly, *eleven* buttercups. Who would have thought? However hard I tried to make it so, my item was not one of them. Next page. Aha! This looked more like it. Bushy cinquefoil? Nope, leaves not *quiiite* right, are they? As the gnats descended, I noticed that there were six more pages ahead, each packed with five-petaled yellow flowers—St. Johnsworts, loosestrifes, puccoons—*Puccoons! What the . . . heck! I'll do this*

Diana Kappel-Smith, an artist and naturalist, is the author of three books of essays: *Wintering, Desert Time,* and *Night Life: Nature from Dusk to Dawn.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

some other time! I started up the trail, swatting away, at which point I realized that I couldn't hear my friends anymore, and began to run. The trail forked, and there were a few bad moments before I caught up to the group, sitting by a streamside sipping from water bottles. By that time I was hot and in a foul mood and still gripping the culprit—the consarned book.

I was tempted to can the whole thing right there. I was tempted to do this many times, in fact. Even if I didn't heave the book into the underbrush, I could have taken it home and put it on a shelf, which would have amounted to the same thing.

Why I persisted in carrying it around and consulting its crowded pages at every opportunity, I have no idea. The book was stubborn; well, I was stubborn, too; that was part of it. And I had no choice, really, not if I wanted to *get in.* A landscape may be handsome in the aggregate, but this book led to the particulars, and that's what I wanted. A less complete guide would have been easier to start with, but more frustrating in the end. A more complete book—one of the official Floras—would have been impossible for me to use. So I persisted in wrestling with the Peterson's, and thus by slow degrees the crowd of plant stuff in the world became composed of individuals. As it did, the book changed: its cover was stained by water and snack food, the spine grew invitingly lax, some of the margins sprouted cryptic annotations.

By the time the next summer came I had bought the field guide some accompaniments: bug dope and a hand lens and a small notebook. I had fully discovered the joy of the hunt, and every new species had its trophy of data—name and place and date—to be jotted down. If I'd found a flower before, I was happy to see it again, just as one is uplifted by the singing of a familiar hymn. I often addressed it with enthusiasm: *Hi there, Solidago hispida!* I did this silently, of course, but as I've gotten older and less inhibited, I've sometimes forgotten myself and let fly. And why not? I discovered early on that a plant's Latin name is a name of power by which the plant can be uniquely identified among different spoken tongues, across continents, and through time. The genus name lashes it firmly to its closest kin, while its species name describes a personal attribute—*rubrum* meaning red, *officinale* meaning medicinal, *odoratus* meaning smelly, and so on. It all makes such delightful sense! The Latin rolls off the tongue in a satisfying way, a fossil language that is still, here, in the Realm of Living Things, alive and liquid and irreducible.

For a while I was curious about that single letter that plants have after their binomial—rather like British peers, I thought—and was amused to find out that this was the initial of the sainted immortal who had "discovered" the species and named it for posterity. Though the Peterson's lacks this sophistication, other botany texts include it, and at that time I was meticulous in noting it down. I remember climbing Mount Washington the summer after I bought the Peterson's (I see this from my notebook) and finding the Lapland rosebay, *Diapensia lapponica L.* By then I knew that *L* stood for Carolus Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist who invented this luscious nomenclature more than two centuries ago. He named this very plant, himself, from a specimen that must have come from Lapland—and here it was in New Hampshire! I stood there on the peak, hair streaming in the wind (metaphorically speaking; knowing the weather for which the White Mountains are famous, I was probably hunched in the fog). I had entered the land of the musk ox and the reindeer, the Circumpolar North, and hovered in the presence of the Great Botanist Himself. His rosebay bloomed at my feet, with enough magenta in each little mound to make my retinas effervesce with joy.

Somewhere in its second year, the book's dust jacket, with all its pretty colors, began to disintegrate. I tore it up and used the bits to mark sites of future searches and past victories. When I ran out of dust jacket, I used whatever came handy—sticks, matchbook covers, strips torn from a package of peanut M&M's. This became part of the field guide's natural habiliment, a frill of bookmarks, like the topknot of a distressed parrot.

I became more successful at identifying plants in the field, though my hiking com-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

panions still tended to be mystified by my enthusiasms. Three years later I climbed the same little mountain—in the Camden Hills in Maine—where I had carried the Peterson's on its first outing. The yellow flower was still there by the trailside.

"Geum virginianum!" I pantingly announced (the delightful little rough avens—best identified from the White section even though this one *was* Yellow).

"Jim who?" said someone.

"Virgin *what?*" giggled another.

In wintertime, while the book rested on a shelf, the green of its spine was a consolation, promising that the weather would one day be warm and that I would be out in it. Finally I decided that I was not out in it enough, so in the early 1970s I moved to a farm in rural Vermont. The back-to-the-land movement was at its height, and for some of us who were of college and draft age, rural hardships seemed better than alternatives elsewhere. What I remember was our pride in growing vegetables and cutting wood, our desire for everything natural. So during that first summer in the Green Mountains, I went to the local college and signed up for a course in field ecology.

The first day of class I met Julie, another refugee from points south who—miracle of miracles!—shared my interest in rambling around outdoors. Three afternoons a week, after class, we took field trips of our own. We followed river valleys and plunged into bogs and climbed mountains without worrying too much about inclement weather or property boundaries. We always took the Peterson's along. After a while it wasn't enough for us just to name things; we wanted to know what they were good for. So the guide got cross-referenced to *Culpeper's Complete Herbal* and to *Sturtevant's Edible Plants of the World* and—when questions of identity were dicey—to the college's herbarium. Our houses filled with rustling bunches of drying herbs—self-heal, yarrow, mullein, goldenseal, boneset, bergamot. Our neighbors thought these were, you know, drugs or something, which I suppose they were. We compounded herb teas with which we dosed ourselves and our long-suffering friends; every bunch of field flowers on a kitchen table became an opportunity for declamations in Latin; swims in the local pond were voyages of discovery to insect-eating sundews, rare stands of wild azalea, peculiar bladderworts floating on balls of captured air. At night I would pore over the pages of my Peterson's, catching up on my notes, studying the shapes and habitats of unfamiliar plants so that I might recognize them when I saw them in the flesh. Surprisingly, this often worked. I would notice the latest grail as soon as it hove into view and would fling myself on it with a cry of recognition. That summer, my field guide got the greatest sustained workout of its long life. Its pages grew spotted with plant juice from having specimens thrust into them, annotations threatened to swamp the text, and the cover began, ever so gently, to decorticate from the binding.

The book got used, of course, after that, but not with such intensity. It isn't that we actually found everything in there—oh my God no! It would take a dozen summers like that one, as unfettered as we were, to *find* all the flowers in that book. And the book is not complete, we discovered that. There's more out there than you can imagine—more than anyone could encompass—some of it rare, much of it secretive, all of it meaningful.

We identified individual plants in our rambles, but from the particulars we began to know wholes. Bogs held one community, montane forests held another, and the plants they held in common were clues to intricate dramas of climate change and continental drift. So from plant communities it followed that the grand schemes of things, when they came our way, arrived rooted in real place and personal experience: quaternary geology, biogeography, evolutionary biology all lay on the road that we had begun to travel.

In the next few years, both of us would earn undergraduate degrees in botany. Julie went on to get her Ph.D. and was hired by the Soil Conservation Service; I grew by stages into a nature writer and illustrator. Both of us think of that wild summer as having been the real beginning of our careers.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

By the time summer came to an end, the wildflower guide was accompanied by one of the official Floras, plus other volumes from the Peterson series: *Trees and Shrubs, Ferns, Animal Tracks, Birds*—those were early ones. Nowadays, as I pass my half-century mark, my bookshelves are full of biological reference works. There are handbooks and encyclopedias and vintage tomes, boxes of periodicals and papers and diskettes, field guides to an array of subjects and places. In all this diversity, plant and flower guides still have the upper hand. And among these, my original *Field Guide to Wildflowers of Northeastern and North Central North America*—its full title—reigns as the great-grandmarm. It's in smithereens now and buckled by damp, held together with a trio of rubber bands. In spite of its copious annotations and cross-references, I tend to use a newer model, though I do take the old one along from time to time, just to let it smell the *Diapensia*, so to speak, much as I might take an arthritic family dog for a ramble, out of kindness, and because of happy memories of adventurous times when both of us were less marked up.

Rereading this book has been interesting, partly because I never really read it to begin with. Not beginning to end, like other books. I pored over it, argued with it, carried it around—but I didn't read it. Well, I've read it now! In the process, I've discovered a couple of things that I never knew were there.

First of all, in the introduction, I discovered a Roger Tory Peterson that I didn't know existed. I met him a time or two; he was an acquaintance of my father, and his son was a friend of mine. I thought of him as a grand old man, an artist, somewhat supercilious, perhaps, but why shouldn't he have been? I'd never thought of him as actually *doing* writing or illustrating, not the way I did. But here he is, in the introduction, getting talked into making the drawings because the original illustrator was detained in a publishing wrangle. That's exactly what happened to me! That's how I started my own illustrative career. By mistake. And look, here he is driving thousands of miles in his station wagon and spending nights in motels drawing his subjects into the wee hours. As for the rare plants—look here: "I often drew them while lying flat on the ground." He was suddenly a colleague, getting dirty, finding—in the light of life—that his book needed to be changed. In the process of drawing, he got an education. As a result, there are more plants in the book than were originally intended, and fewer words. He had no botanical pretensions. He did have an artist's trained eye and he gypsied over the whole territory. So there you are. He drew 1,500 plants for this book. I am forever amazed.

They are wonderful drawings, and the very first page of the pictorial guide is, for some reason, chockablock with flowers I know well. I could write an entire essay on the contents of this first page alone, six "WHITE Miscellaneous Flowering Shrubs," all with interesting lifestyles and personal associations. For example, here's Labrador-tea. Its text is particularly crisp:

> LABRADOR-TEA *Ledum groenlandicum*
> HEATH FAMILY (Ericaceae)
> Note the white or rusty *wool on underside* of untoothed leaves. Leaves leathery, with *rolled edges;* fragrant. A low shrub (to 3 ft.). Cold bogs. Canada, n. U.S. MAY–JUNE

Note that it grows in Labrador and that the type specimen likely came from Greenland (*groenland*) and that it's related to the heather on the Scottish moors that were once inhabited by my personal antecedents. Its habitat is also a giveaway: this is a tundra denizen that has hung on here under our post-glacial spruces. My annotation says: *Bear Swamp 6/12/73.* Bear Swamp in Vermont is a kind of botanist's wet dream, filled with rare plants and anomalous associations, and since I lived on its borders for more than twelve years, its name alone conjures up dozens of the most intense memories. I also remember that Labrador-tea was one of the items that Julie and I collected and brewed up. I can still taste it. Though the power of my memory is not what it used to be when it comes to things like dentist appointments and bank balances,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my capacity for botanical minutiae seems undiminished. I last saw Labrador-tea just three weeks ago, on Deer Isle in Maine. I remember the path, the autumn light on the dark leaves, and the feel of the tips I reached out to touch as I passed, releasing a cloud of scent. I was tempted to pick some to brew and drink, and resisted.

If this is what the first page conjured up, I think you can see that rereading this book has been like watching my life pass before my eyes. The text is dull for the same reasons that it's so useful in the heat of identification, so I haven't enjoyed the reading part, exactly. But I took pleasure in the drawings. I found myself poring over the images of those plants that I've wanted to find and never have—pasqueflower, whorled pogonia, atamasco-lily—and the creepy ones like dodder and water-dragon. I found fragments of chopstick wrappers and Band-Aid papers doing their duty as bookmarks. I found the aster, too. There are forty-four species in the book, but the one that got me started so long ago was a New England aster, *Aster novae-angliae*. It's wonderful enough when it's purple, but the pink form knocks my socks off every time.

The other thing that I discovered was a plant that, I swear to you, I have never seen in there before. (This has often happened; I suspect it always will. Little Peterson *djinns* must come and put new stuff in the field guide overnight.) What I noticed this time was bur cucumber, *Sicyos angulatus*. Though there are only twelve wild cucurbits in the field guide's area, I could tell it was a member of the cucumber family right away. I'm so comfy with most plant families that I can usually assign a plant to its own on sight, a kind of gestalt botanizing that people can find impressive and that can lead me to think that I know a thing or two. But this was something new. I studied the drawing: prickly, star-shaped clusters of fruit, very funny-looking. Fat, cucumbery leaves.

Then, just yesterday, I was stopped at a traffic light down by the grade school. A vine was tangled in the fence there. I stared at it with my mouth open while the light turned green and everybody honked at me. There it was, bur cucumber, large as life.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The 2001 Phi Beta Kappa Book Awards

The Christian Gauss Award

TRANSCENDENTAL WORDPLAY: AMERICA'S ROMANTIC PUNSTERS & THE SEARCH FOR THE LANGUAGE OF NATURE. *By Michael West. Ohio University Press.*

Citation: West examines nineteenth-century American attitudes toward language—the making of a new language inherited from English. He regards the "revolution" of transcendentalism as essentially philological, and seeks to determine when and how Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, Dickinson, Melville, and others got their proclivity for extravagant puns, riddles, acrostics, anagrams, and other forms of wordplay. West's early essays on Thoreau have been important to scholars of mid-nineteenth-century American literature. The judges considered *Transcendental Wordplay*—which revises and amplifies those and other essays—to be a classic. *Michael West is Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson Award

VAN GOGH AND GAUGUIN: THE SEARCH FOR SACRED ART. *By Debora Silverman. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.*

Citation: Combining intellectual history and art history, contextual and formal analysis, Silverman's study reveals the unsuspected centrality of religious sensibility to Van Gogh's and Gauguin's quest for a modern art. The book is marked by thorough research, detailed and consistently persuasive argument, profound analysis, and a literary style that draws the reader into the paintings and the new world from which they emerged. *Debora Silverman holds the University of California President's Chair in Modern European History, Art, and Culture at the University of California, Los Angeles.*

Phi Beta Kappa Award in Science

TWO-MILE TIME MACHINE: ICE CORES, ABRUPT CLIMATE CHANGE, AND OUR FUTURE. *By Richard B. Alley. Princeton University Press.*

Citation: Richard Alley explores aspects of climatology, meteorology, geology, chemistry, and physics. He illustrates how scientists extract information from experimental evidence, and how scientific models are constructed and tested. The judges particularly commended the creativity of Alley's analogies—roller coasters, conveyor belts, traffic around city squares. *Richard B. Alley is Professor of Geosciences at Pennsylvania State University.*

The award-winning books were selected by panels of scholars in related fields. More than a hundred entries were submitted by trade publishers and university presses throughout the United States.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Homme, Hombre, Omul

JIM HOLT

THE POWER OF BABEL:
A NATURAL HISTORY OF LANGUAGE
by John McWhorter. W. H. Freeman. $26.

Many years ago, while vacationing in Rome, I got into an argument with a professor of Italian from Notre Dame over which was the better language, English or Italian. I made the usual hackneyed case for English: that it had just about the biggest vocabulary of any language in the world; that, being compounded of Anglo-Saxon and Norman-French, it was capable of both teutonic force and latinate finesse; that it was supremely flexible, in that, for example, many nouns could double as verbs (knife, school); that it was the language of Shakespeare; and so on. My Notre Dame friend countered that, no, no, no, it was Italian that had the more expansive vocabulary, thanks to its many borrowings from speakers of other tongues who had fetched up on the peninsula over the centuries. Spoken Italian, he said, was far more nuanced than spoken English (to back this up, he ran through two dozen distinct options in Italian for insulting someone with an excremental metaphor). And ditto, he claimed, for literary Italian versus literary English; the proof, he said, was that Lear could be adequately translated into Italian, whereas *La divina commedia* could not be adequately translated into English. Besides, he observed, whereas I was a seemingly incorrigible monoglot (as are many of those who chauvinistically hymn the virtues of English), he had been brought up speaking both Italian and English from birth; therefore, he could rule with a kind of infallibility on which was the richer tongue.

I have a feeling that John McWhorter, the author of *The Power of Babel,* would have found this whole argument rather foolish. McWhorter is a professional linguist (he teaches at the University of California at Berkeley), and linguists these days by and large believe that no language is inherently more precise or nuanced than any other. In other words, all the world's languages, including Italian and English, are pretty much equivalent as media of thought and communication. But when we turn from expressive power to grammatical structure—from semantics to syntax—this equality disappears. Linguists have found huge disparities in the complexity of different languages. However, neither English nor Italian is anywhere close to being the most elaborate. "One might reasonably suppose," McWhorter writes, "that a First World culture with tall buildings, cappuccino, and Pokémon would have a grammatically 'richer' language, necessary to convey the particular complexities inherent to our treadmill to oblivion." In fact, First World languages "are 'Romper Room' compared with almost any language spoken by the hunter-gatherers who first inhabited the Americas." Were a laurel to be awarded to the most rococo language in the world, it would go not to Italian or English or Japanese or French, but to the West African language of Fula, whose speakers get by on no fewer than sixteen genders rather than the usual three or two or zero. Talk about nuance!

What interests McWhorter, as the title of

Jim Holt's work has appeared in *The New Yorker, Harper's,* and *The New York Review of Books.* His history of the idea of the infinitesimal, *Worlds Within Worlds,* is forthcoming from Four Walls Eight Windows.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

this marvelously entertaining and often passionate book might suggest, is how the babel of tongues spoken in the world today, some six thousand in all, arose from a single primordial language. What evidence is there for this Ur-language? Well, it seems reasonably certain that anatomically modern humans came into existence some 150,000 years ago in East Africa. It also seems clear that human language is genetically encoded. (Babies begin to babble spontaneously in all cultures, even those in which they are not specifically encouraged to talk.) So the most economical hypothesis is that the mutation giving rise to our language instinct occurred once in the original set of East African humans, rather than at various later times after their descendants had migrated to Europe, Asia, and the rest of the world.

No sooner did the Ur-language begin to be spoken by those prehistoric East Africans than it began to undergo all sorts of changes. That is why no one speaks anything like it today. As McWhorter never tires of emphasizing, language is change. Linguistic evolution, moreover, is autonomous and self-driven; it rarely has anything to do with culture. The components of language seem to be inherently unstable. Vowels mutate, and unaccented syllables cease to be pronounced (thus the Latin *femina* becomes the French *femme*). Meaning drifts. (In Old English, *silly* meant "blessed"; but blessedness connotes innocence, and innocence connotes weakness and simplicity—hence the contemporary meaning.) Some grammatical patterns arbitrarily expand and push out others. (The ending *-s*, once one of many plural forms in English, became the rule; otherwise the plural of book would be *beek*.) Words get "rebracketed." An ekename, an "also name," becomes a nickname.

A linguistic community left to itself tends to accumulate weird tics and complications, inscrutable to outsiders. Take the "evidential markers" commonly found in Amerindian languages. In Makah, spoken by the Pacific Northwestern tribe that achieved notoriety a few years ago when it reclaimed its whale-hunting tradition, you can't just say the weather's lousy; you have to specify your evidence grammatically ("Looks like lousy weather," "They say the weather's lousy," etc.). Or take gender markers. Why should French sort its nouns quite capriciously into masculine and feminine categories, forcing the clueless American in Paris to hedge his bets by mumbling an article that awkwardly blends *le* and *la*? Why does German require a trio of genders, making the fork (*die Gabel*) female, the spoon (*der Löffel*) male, and the poor knife (*das Messer*) neuter? (McWhorter himself twice mistakenly reverses the sexes of the first pair.)

When its speakers become geographically separated, a language inevitably fragments into dialects. But when can we say it has fragmented into different *languages*? For McWhorter, the language/dialect distinction borders on being meaningless. "Don't tell the Scandinavians I said this, but 'Swedish,' 'Norwegian,' and 'Danish' are really one 'language,' 'Scandinavian,'" he writes; people speaking these "languages" can converse with each other more easily than, for example, people speaking the standard and the Milanese dialects of Italian. Hindi and Urdu are essentially two dialects of the same language, but the eight main "dialects" of Chinese are so vastly different that they are tantamount to eight languages. Practically every language is actually a cluster of dialects, and which among them gets identified as the "standard" dialect is, McWhorter insists, a matter of luck rather than merit. Well, not only luck. As another linguist once put it, "A language is a dialect with an army and a navy."

Once the Ur-language fissioned into multiple languages, another form of linguistic change became possible: blending. This can be as simple as one language borrowing words from another (with the direction usually being from the conqueror to the conquered). English, of course, is a promiscuous borrower: of all the words in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, no fewer than 99 percent were taken from other languages (although the relative few deriving from Old English—words like *and, from,* and *love*—do amount to 62 percent of the words most used). Sometimes we have borrowed the same word twice,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

first from Norman-French and later from the Parisian dialect, which had *gu* where the Normans had *w:* hence *warranty* and *guarantee, reward* and *regard, warden* and *guardian.* Contemporary Japanese is saturated with loanwords from English, including the charming *appurupai* (apple pie).

There is a great variety of more complicated ways in which languages can blend together, and McWhorter gives a dazzling survey of them. Romanian, for example, is the "twisted sister" of the Romance family, placing its definite articles after rather than before the noun (for "the man," French has *l'homme,* Spanish *el hombre,* and Italian *l'uomo,* but in Romanian it's *omul*). Why? Because Romanian was spoken bilingually for so long with other languages in the Balkan group, whose articles fall after rather than before the noun. A more intimate—and surprisingly common—mating of languages occurs when speakers keep the grammar of their ancestors but replace the entire vocabulary with that of another tongue. In the Ecuadoran Andes, the Indians speak a language called Media Lengua: its vocabulary is pure Spanish (picked up by young men during sojourns in Quito), but its grammar, down to the subtlest details, is from their rural Quechuan. Sometimes the vocabulary and grammar of not two but three distinct languages get stirred up together, as in Wutun, a mixture of Mongolian, Mandarin, and Tibetan spoken in Western China—"a marvelous chili of a language," we are told.

McWhorter is no dry scholar, but a slavering gourmand who delights in discovering "chilis," "stews," and "casseroles" all over the linguistic world. His examples, drawn from every tongue imaginable, multiply to heady effect. Footnotes contain not journal references but wry little essays on pop culture—why, for instance, the subtler jokes in his "favorite TV show of all time," *Married . . . With Children,* usually, but not always, fail to come off in the popular dubbed German version, "Eine Schreckliche Nette Familie." Yet at the core of *The Power of Babel* is a set of original arguments—especially on the way languages get stripped down ("pidginized") and then fleshed out again ("creolized")—that make it more than just a deft popularization. The only predictable thing about this book is its hostility to prescriptivism—to the idea that one dialect or rule of grammar can be more "correct" than another. McWhorter writes that "there is no such thing as human beings speaking 'bad grammar,'" and that "it is through just the kind of thing that seems so slovenly today that the language of tomorrow develops." At times he appears to rejoice in the incessant mixing and changing of language; at others he merely implies that fighting it will leave you on the wrong side of history.

Predictable these anti-prescriptivist sentiments may be, but they are also, for the most part, quite sound. It is hard to see how loanwords could degrade rather than enrich a language's expressive capacities (though there is something touching, I admit, about the insistence of the Quebecois language police that a hamburger be called a *hambourgeois*). I am a little less sure about language change that results from sheer laziness. McWhorter quotes a Latin grammarian complaining in 63 A.D. that "the masses barely use anything but the nominative and accusative" anymore; well, we think, who can blame them? But often, slovenly usage collapses distinctions worth making and coarsens communication. Preferring one dialect to another is not always just a matter of taste or snobbery. This is easiest to see by looking at the part of language that deals with quantitative thought. A dialect that countenances expressions like "twice as less than" (as some English dialects do) puts its speakers at a real disadvantage when it comes to reasoning about amounts. Experiments have shown that Chinese children can mentally calculate more swiftly than American children simply because their number words are more streamlined; and pity the French child, who has to wrestle with absurdities like *quatre-vingt-dix-sept* for ninety-seven.

For all McWhorter's celebration of linguistic change, there is one kind that he seems a tad ambivalent about: the tendency of language to accumulate tenses, inflections, possessive forms, tonal variations, and other gram-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

matical complications that he refers to alternatively as "nonessential frippery," "decorative junk," "crud," and "sludge." Yet the aesthete in him revels in the sheer variety of these baroque linguistic architectures, "elegantly combining structure and chaos in six thousand different ways." (Of the artificially austere Esperanto, a sort of linguistic Bauhaus, he would probably say, "Less is a bore.") Hence his distress at the rapidity with which these languages are disappearing today as a result of economic globalization, urbanization, intermarriage, and in some cases deliberate government policy. The languages now spoken across the world are a remnant of the some 100,000 tongues that the Ur-language had morphed into before the rise of agriculture around 9000 B.C. At present, a language dies about every two weeks, extinguished by "the encroachments of global capitalism." (One gets an occasional whiff of Bay Area radicalism in this book, but it's hard to fault the analysis.) McWhorter has two proposals for coping with this mass extinction. First, he exhorts his fellow linguists to take some time off from their abstract Chomskyian labors and go out into the field and document a dying language, so that it will at least leave a sort of fossil. Second, citing the relatively successful language revivals of Irish, Breton, Maori, Welsh, and Hawaiian, he advocates the preservation of minority tongues as taught living languages, fostered by schools if not by households.

This sounds reasonable on the face of it, but I wonder whether it is really fair to encourage a young speaker of Swahili to study the vanishing village language of Dahalo in school instead of an entirely unthreatened language—English, say, or Mandarin—whose acquisition would open up entirely new cultural vistas to her. Language conservation, like any other good, comes at a cost. Still, McWhorter's fervor here, like his erudition and humor elsewhere in this book, is highly seductive. After reading *The Power of Babel*, with its unfailingly cosmopolitan view of how language evolves, I thought back on my horribly parochial debate with the professor of Italian in Rome and practically wept with embarrassment.

Consider Us Men

A Gentleman of Color:
The Life of James Forten
By Julie Winch. Oxford University Press. $35.

Reviewed by
DAVID LEVERING LEWIS

When James Forten, aged seventy-six, died in February of 1842, Philadelphians white and black mourned his passing in an outpouring of tributes not seen since the demise of Stephen Girard, the city's leading financier and great benefactor. Although escalating prejudice against people of color (and even acts of violence against his family) had poisoned the last decade of Forten's life, white Philadelphians considered it fitting to atone publicly at the time of his death. The freeborn grandson of a West African slave brought into the Pennsylvania colony in the 1680s, Forten had studied at the abolitionist school of the Quaker Anthony Benezet and had risen by intelligent enterprise to the pinnacle of business success, carving a respected niche not only among the city's Quaker aristocracy, but also in the national anti-slavery community. As historian Julie Winch's significant, exhaustive, and curiously disorganized biography—the first in more than thirty years—makes abundantly clear, James Forten's success was nothing less than fabulous in an era of nigh universal enslavement of Africans in America. Although Pennsylvania enacted a 1780 statute of gradual manumission, definitive abolition of slavery would not come until many years later.

Born ten years before the Declaration of Independence promulgated the self-evident

David Levering Lewis, Martin Luther King University Professor at Rutgers University, is a member of the SCHOLAR's Editorial Board and a frequent contributor to its pages. His *W. E. B. DuBois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963* won a Pulitzer Prize in 2001.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

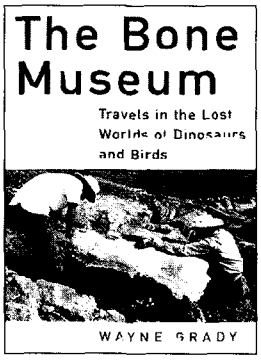
truths of equality and inalienable rights that implicitly excluded him, Forten became sole owner in 1798 of Philadelphia's leading sailmaking establishment, James Forten and Company, employing some thirty journeymen and apprentices of both races. Seven years later, in a much commented-upon ceremony presided over by Absalom Jones, America's first colored Episcopal priest, Forten married Charlotte Vandine, a freeborn young woman of solid pedigree and mixed African and Native American ancestry. The following year, 1806, he purchased an imposing brick home in a neighborhood of merchant and professional families at Third and Lombard Streets, where Charlotte delivered, in rapid succession, Margaretta, Harriet, James, Jr., Robert Bridges, and others, until there were nine surviving children. Ninety-two Lombard Street became the gathering place for affluent colored Philadelphia, a forum of tasteful furnishings, polished silver, and elegant dinners that also attracted not a few upper-class whites, among them the Grimké sisters, Sarah and Angelina; Benjamin Lundy; and William Penn. In the meantime, despite the disastrous 1807 Embargo Act of the Jefferson presidency banning American vessels from foreign ports, James Forten and Company managed to weather the lean years of Philadelphia maritime activity and even prospered through moneylending and extensive real estate purchases. Forten's hundred-thousand-dollar assets made him one of the richest men of color in America, second only to his future son-in-law Robert Purvis, Sr., another freeborn phenomenon of the early Republic, whose inherited wealth from an English father placed him in the front rank of the nation's wealthy.

"By the 1830s," Professor Winch informs us, "James Forten's [sailmaking] loft was a showplace of his industry and his values." Forten's values were indeed as remarkable as his industry, and it is this part of his story that his biographer treats in a manner that is often exasperating in its chronological leaps; its thematically splayed presentation of Forten's animating ideas and social commitments; and its dense disgorging of a surfeit of information about religious institutions, yellow fever epidemics, economic downturns, and the well-known teaching career of granddaughter Charlotte Forten Grimké. Like the attractive anomaly Robert Purvis, who proudly rejected the untroubled assimilation into whiteness that might have been assured to him by his imperceptible African ancestry, great wealth, and aristocratic mien, Forten courageously rejected the condescending racial exceptionalism his business contacts and well-mannered acquiescence in the status quo would have afforded. It is true, nevertheless, that his evolving civil rights ideals followed a cautious arc. In 1813, in Pennsylvania's ongoing debate about the exercise of the ballot and the rights of nonwhites, Forten conceded that he and his kind were "so circumscribed that we must consider ourselves incompetent to the task." He asked only that they be "considered as men" under the law. We must regret that no diary or cache of personal letters survives to allow Professor Winch to expose the inner thoughts of her subject, and that there is no published record particularly helpful until the later years. In lieu of evidence, the author too often indulges in conjecture about events her subject "could hardly have missed" (the July 4, 1788, celebration) or "probably left his sail loft to attend" (the August 26, 1812, mass meeting about the British capture of Washington). That said, however, Professor Winch sometimes fails to conjecture when it is most needed.

The source of Forten's initial timorousness about citizenship may have lain in the unique beginnings of his business success, on the one hand, and, on the other, in what must have seemed for a time the realistic options available to the African in the new United States. Professor Winch's pages describing Forten's life on board the Revolutionary War privateer the *Royal Louis* are engrossing, yet they reflect less explanatory resourcefulness than they might have. The captain of the *Royal Louis* was an associate of the white Philadelphia businessman Robert Bridges, in whose sailmaking loft Forten would advance from journeyman to manager and, remarkably, to sole heir of the firm that became Forten and Company. Bridges even purchased a home for young

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

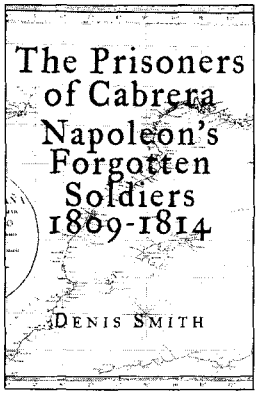
ADVENTURE



The Bone Museum
Travels in the Lost Worlds of Dinosaurs and Birds
Wayne Grady *$24.95 hardcover*

"Grady sets out on a fun travelogue that brings him from his native Canada to the distant reaches of Chilean Patagonia and back through the Alberta Badlands, trying to find evidence in an ongoing paleontological debate: did dinosaurs evolve into birds of the modern world?" ***—Publishers Weekly***

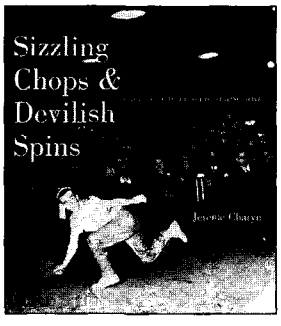
INTRIGUE



The Prisoners of Cabrera
Napoleon's Forgotten Soldiers, 1809-1814
Denis Smith *$24.00 hardcover*

"Ably explored and told, *The Prisoners of Cabrera* will be of considerable interest to students of the Napoleonic era and of issues of military justice." ***—Kirkus Reviews* (starred)**

"Little has been published on Napoleon's peninsular campaign and practically nothing in English on Cabrera." ***—Library Journal***



. . . and PING-PONG

Sizzling Chops & Devilish Spins
Ping-Pong and the Art of Staying Alive
Jerome Charyn *$24.00 hardcover*

"In *Sizzling Chops & Devilish Spins*, a quirky and fascinating little book, Jerome Charyn mourns the passing of an era, and makes us mourn it, too. . . . Here he takes us into his passion for Ping-Pong and how it led him to basement clubs in New York and tournaments in France. . . . Charyn's lurching prose is fast and fun and full of detours." ***—San Diego Union Tribune***

FOUR WALLS EIGHT WINDOWS

Available at your local bookstore, or call **1-800-788-3123** to order by credit card.
Visit our website at **www.4w8w.com**.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Forten, a gesture that resembled the adoption offer from the British captain on whose warship Forten was imprisoned after the capture of the *Royal Louis*. One must assume from these and related details provided by Professor Winch that James Forten's winning precocity disposed fair-minded, influential whites to advance his career both as a good investment for themselves and as a splendid example to Pennsylvania's marginalized, voteless, and pauperized free Negro community.

If his own privileged status never blinded him to the appalling conditions and limitations afflicting other free people of color, it did obscure for a time the devious endgame of the American Colonization Society (ACS) and many of its Quaker sympathizers.

It was probably partly out of loyalty to the emigrationist project of Paul Cuffe, another remarkable African American businessman, that Forten's growing doubts about the Sierra Leonean resettlement of free people were concealed until after the Massachusetts merchant-mariner's death in 1817. Cuffe's plan was well-intentioned, if impractical, but there was nothing well-intentioned about the well-funded, widely trumpeted Africa scheme of the ACS, designed to purge the South of its sizable free Negro population and to skim off the cream of leadership in the North. The reminder of the ACS's broad appeal to the better class of whites and of its underestimated power of coercion and co-optation among literate blacks is one of this biography's most significant aspects, and Professor Winch plausibly deduces that it was Forten, writing the following year in the *Union United States Gazette* as "A Man of Color," who led the charge against the organization. "We have . . . coolly and deliberately investigated," he declared in the name of the new, mostly black American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery in Philadelphia, "and we are of the opinion that [the ACS] is calculated to perpetuate Slavery in this Land of Liberty." Seeking a platform to oppose the ACS's Liberian colonization propaganda, Forten backed the startup in 1827 of *Freedom's Journal*, black America's first newspaper, edited jointly by the black Presbyterian minister Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm, the third black American college graduate. Writing as "P" in the short-lived weekly, Forten blasted the white emigrationists and denounced a bill in the state legislature appropriating $2,000 to the ACS. But Russwurm's sudden embrace of the ACS and his subsequent departure for Liberia shocked Forten and the free community everywhere.

More serious shocks were in store as the 1830s unfolded. Reverberations from Denmark Vesey's 1822 slave insurrection in South Carolina had shaken the slaveholding states, and Nat Turner's Virginia uprising eight years later caused panic, giving redoubled impetus to the removal of unenslaved men and women, north and south. The pogrom unleashed by Cincinnati's whites, which destroyed a vibrant and prosperous community of free people and drove them off to Canada, was an augury of the rioting, mayhem, and endemic hardening of relations that soon spread to Utica and Palmyra, New York, and New Haven, Connecticut (whose citizens vetoed a Negro vocational college for which Forten had pledged financial support). By 1834 the panic had infected New York City and Philadelphia. Rioters attacked Negro neighborhoods, and Forten's eldest son was stunned to be accosted by Irish toughs. Another Forten nom de plume, "A Colored Philadelphian," was now appearing frequently in William Lloyd Garrison's three year-old *Liberator*, the fierce abolitionist newspaper that Forten's repeated infusions of money ("most timely aid," Garrison called it) had done much to keep afloat. To

BUSINESS MANAGER WANTED

THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR is seeking a professional with magazine management skills to oversee its circulation, advertising, and financial operations. Candidates must be located in or near Washington, D.C.

Please direct inquiries to Jean Stipicevic, Managing Editor, at **scholar@pbk.org.**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have allies like Garrison was to invite not merely the full wrath of the ACS but also the fury of the Philadelphia mob. There were personal threats against Forten and depredations upon his real estate holdings. "Year after year the violence continued, often sparked by the most trivial of causes," Professor Winch records, "an exchange of words, a 'disrespectful' look, a rumor that the black people in one or another neighborhood were getting above themselves. . . ."

Quaker liberalism yielded to economic self-interest and political exigency as the industrialization of the city and its rapidly growing population of southern runaways raised the racial stakes and altered the once-genteel civic landscape. Forten and his son-in-law Purvis drafted petitions, convened public meetings, appealed to the decency of powerful whites, and contributed thousands of dollars to the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1838 in a failed effort to prevent Pennsylvania whites from amending the state constitution in order to bar free blacks from obtaining the vote. In that same fateful year, with Forten's friends Garrison and John Greenleaf Whittier in attendance, grand Pennsylvania Hall, erected in the heart of Philadelphia with forty thousand abolitionist dollars as the tabernacle of interracial enlightenment, was allowed to burn to the ground by the usually conscientious mayor and his efficient fire department. Soon afterward, Forten's sons were barred from any career to which their once privileged status had suited them. Byberry, the sprawling Purvis estate in rural New Jersey, served more and more as a tranquil refuge for the Forten siblings and their well-bred kin. Early-nineteenth-century Philadelphia, a promised land for at least some gifted people of color, was well on its way to becoming the late-nineteenth-century racial dead end that W. E. B. Du Bois would capture in *The Philadelphia Negro,* his incomparable urban study.

James Forten spent his final years as an active member of the much-misunderstood American Moral Reform Society, an African American organization whose ultra-integrationist aspirations Professor Winch helpfully refrains from caricaturing in the usual way, as elitist and tainted by racial escapism. According to a source in this biography, when he died

THE GILDER LEHRMAN INSTITUTE OF AMERICAN HISTORY

invites applications for short-term fellowships in American Civilization in two categories:

- RESEARCH FELLOWSHIPS for post-doctoral scholars at every faculty rank; and
- DISSERTATION FELLOWSHIPS for doctoral candidates in their final year before submission.

Gilder Lehrman Fellowships support work in one of four archives:

- THE GILDER LEHRMAN COLLECTION AT THE MORGAN LIBRARY;
- THE NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY;
- THE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY RARE BOOK AND MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION; and
- THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY.

DEADLINE FOR APPLICATION: MAY 1, 2002

For information on application procedures, please visit our Web site at http://www.gilderlehrman.org or call (646) 366-9666.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

quietly in the bosom of his family on March 4, 1842, Forten charged Purvis never to forget the plight of the "perishing slaves." Professor Winch's final chapter is almost dismayingly sad. Encumbered by debt and irrecoverable loans to acquaintances and civil rights endeavors, Forten's $67,000 estate, much reduced by the Panic of 1837, evaporated within a few years. James, Jr., decamped to New York and vanished, leaving brother Robert to salvage what he could from the monsoon of repayment demands and vulturine lawsuits. The sailmaking loft was sold at a loss in about 1845. Unwilling to let go of her overly long narrative, biographer Winch speculates that, if the firm had survived a few years longer, "there might have been a recovery. . . . The 1850s saw the heyday of the clipper ships." One would like to think so, even though, as one puts down this engrossing but poorly organized book, the inescapable conclusion appears to be that James Forten's valiant life is but one more depressing illustration of the historic disabilities that were once inflicted by this country as a matter of course upon even the best of its citizens whose skins are dark.

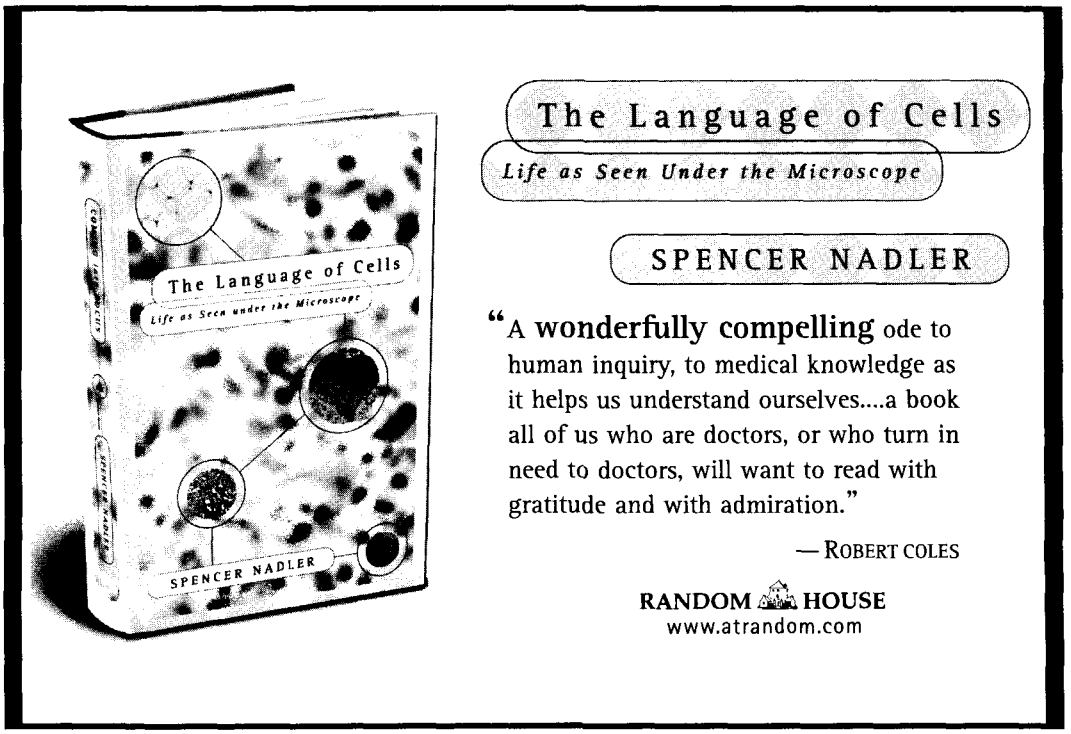
Boneyard Earth

TIME TRAVELER: IN SEARCH OF DINOSAURS AND OTHER FOSSILS FROM MONTANA TO MONGOLIA
By Michael Novacek.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. $26.

Reviewed by JENNIFER SCHUESSLER

Paleontological fieldwork, Michael Novacek's mentor tells him in this engaging memoir and introduction to the subject, is "49 percent anticipation, 49 percent recollection, and 2 percent success." In Novacek's case, the formula seems to be equal parts sweat, intuition, X-ray vision, and blind luck, and it has yielded him two decades' worth of impressive finds across the globe. "Study nature, not

Jennifer Schuessler is an assistant editor at *The New York Review of Books.*



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

books," said the great nineteenth-century naturalist Louis Agassiz. Novacek has followed this commandment with an enthusiasm so contagious you almost feel as if his talent must be too. Closing this crisp primer, the reader expects to look beneath his feet and see whole pages in the long history of life suddenly opening up where mere ground used to be.

Novacek, the Provost of Science and Curator of Paleontology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, is not just a world-class field scientist. He's also one of paleontology's most effective popularizers, a highly entertaining writer who is just as good at bringing oviraptors, glyptodonts, and other fantastic creatures to life in print as he is at spotting their fragmented remains in a wall of rock. An earlier memoir, *Dinosaurs of the Flaming Cliffs*, detailed his field-shaking discoveries in the Mongolian desert in the 1980s. Some—for example, that the oviraptors found in dinosaur nests were not egg thieves but were themselves the nurturing parents—forced the revision of dioramas in his own museum. But Novacek writes exciting books without succumbing to the sensationalism that has dogged "dinosaurology" since nineteenth-century collectors from rival museums competed to haul the biggest skeletons back from the American West.

Time Traveler, Novacek tells us, came out of his desire to relive some of his earlier expeditions, beginning with his adventures as a boy growing up in love with nature in 1950s Los Angeles. The memoir's early chapters flash by like a succession of nostalgic period stills: road trips with his jazz musician father and former "Miss Sweater Girl" mother; backyard games; nuns who rap his knuckles and scold him for wasting his time "reading about monsters." While the overall effect is a bit disjointed, Novacek plants some nice potted lectures in the landscapes of his childhood. At the La Brea Tar Pits, he ponders the demise of dire wolves, saber-toothed cats, and giant ground sloths, resurrected in bone at the nearby L. A. County Museum. In the Santa Monica Mountains, housing tracts, roadcuts, and other scars of development reveal the imprint of creatures who swam ancient seas. And then there is the Grand Canyon, where a fall from the rim would

New Studies of
Jaspers and Descartes

KARL JASPERS ON PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY
Edited by Joseph W. Koterski, S.J., and Raymond J. Langley

This volume contains the first English translations of texts by Karl Jaspers on Aquinas, Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard. In addition, interpretive and critical essays by renowned scholars assess Jaspers' contributions to the history of philosophy and the philosophy of history. This stimulating collection will complement college and university libraries and be of value to anyone interested in comparative Eastern and Western philosophy, the history of ideas, or the interrelations of biography and history.
300 pp • ISBN 1-59102-002-6 • HC $65

PASSION AND VIRTUE IN DESCARTES
Edited by Byron Williston and André Gombay

In the period following publication of the *Meditations*, Descartes was extremely active in attempting to develop a comprehensive ethics, rooted in his analysis of human passions. The present volume is the first collection of original essays—all by leading Descartes scholars—dealing specifically with this aspect of Descartes' thinking as presented in the *Passions of the Soul.* Since in the *Passions* Descartes provides us with the most sophisticated discussion of the composite human being anywhere in his writings, this volume is an indispensable aid to understanding the full scope of Cartesian anthropology.
285 pp • ISBN 1-59102-005-0 • HC $59

HB Humanity Books
an imprint of Prometheus Books
Call toll free (800) 421-0351
Fax (716) 691-0137
www.prometheusbooks.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mean "an unparalleled descent" through 20 million years of time. Novacek peels back layer after layer of rock, from the Vishnu schist to the 250-million-year-old Kaibab limestone, laid down some 100 million years before the appearance of the dinosaurs. The larger Colorado Plateau, he explains during a lucid and expert discussion of plate tectonics, is itself something of a geological mystery, a vast region that rose to elevations of a mile and more without the sort of "gargantuan collisions" that created the Andes or the Himalayas. This "lofty, inert, and exquisitely sculpted land of mystery" is also ideal fossil-hunting ground, a "quiet bed" for remains that are roused slowly through the millennia through the whispering persistence of wind and water.

But then, he asks in chapter three, "who cares about the Grand Canyon and the geologic timescale when you can put your head against a girl's leg and close your eyes, listen to the whoosh of the sea, and smell the slathered Coppertone?" There's an almost willed gonzo boyishness to this part of the book, in which the self-described guitar-playing longhair can't decide between rockhounding and rock stardom. At Santa Monica City College, where he takes the academic "low road" in order to keep playing with his band and to avoid the draft, he starts to get the hang of field paleontology as something other than work that "got you away from normal people and planted you in forlorn, empty places." Even after he leaves music in favor of graduate school, he takes what he calls a "schizophrenic" approach to research, veering from papers on multituberculate mammals of ancient Montana to studies of the freshwater fishes of South America and Africa. There are anecdotes about plaster fights and expedition hazing; nicknames taken from "Gilligan's Island" and frequent quotations from John Wayne movies (a paleontology-as-Western motif runs through the book). Though Novacek gives an excellent overview of the methods of paleontological fieldwork, from screen-washing and fossil-stabilizing techniques to the different ways of dating a piece of rock, he also—in retrospect, at least—revels in its madness: the gruesome injuries and intense gastrointestinal distress.

Somewhere around page 150, Novacek gets through feeling his oats, personally and paleontologically, and settles into what can only be described as a brilliant career. Unlike his fellow academic popularizer Stephen Jay Gould, Novacek is known more for his stunning, far-flung fieldwork than for expounding theoretical Big Ideas, and at times his book has an overly episodic quality, like a screenwriter's treatment of a particularly impressive résumé. In 1982 he is offered the job of a lifetime at the American Museum of Natural History. But as soon as he arrives, he's planning an expedition to Baja California, an isolated region with an intriguing if scanty fossil record. Some five hundred miles south of San Diego, in the soft red sandstone of Occidental Buttes, Novacek's team unearths the remains of creatures rich and strange, including the rare Wyolestes, a sharp-toothed, long-snouted forerunner of the whale. Comparison of these specimens with others from as far afield as the Canadian Arctic suggests a remarkable uniformity across North America nearly 55 million years ago, "a picture of the early Eocene earth as a hothouse that nurtured a Garden of Eden . . . that has not reappeared over such a wide swath of the earth's surface anytime since."

Novacek's first great success, however, comes even closer to the end of the world. In 1984, he receives a visit from a mysterious stranger, a young man from far southern Chile bearing pictures of what appear to be fossil whales, beached some 10,000 feet above sea level in the Andes. After a hair-raising and nearly deadly trip by Cessna, by boat, and on horseback, Novacek and his team reach Pampa Castillo, a magnificent site just north of the Patagonian Ice Field. Here, nearly a thousand feet up a crumbling butte, they find a varied assemblage of Miocene creatures, some twenty million years old, that had eluded such earlier prospectors as George Gaylord Simpson and Darwin himself. Subsequent expeditions farther north along the spine of the Andes yield other finds: a spectacular set of dinosaur tracks running along a limestone slab tilted steeply a thousand feet in the air, and a unique crop of Eocene fossils that allows Novacek to identify a new time interval, the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tinguiririan age, named for the valley where they were found. There are also reminders of the depredations marking our own, human age: Novacek witnesses the violent suppression of an anti-Pinochet riot in a city along Chile's grim industrialized "Carbon Coast"; back in New York City, he finds a note accusing him of illegally sacking fish fossils from a site he never visited.

Novacek's next stop is the remote countryside of Yemen, the possible onetime land bridge between East Africa and Asia. But an anomalous lack of success, coupled with the staggering scenery and savage local customs, prompts him to resort to an awestruck, somewhat pedestrian travelogue on the cruel and mysterious "land of Sheba." (The cowboy movies give way to Lawrence of Arabia; locals are given to laughing and whooping "as if they were attacking a fortress full of infidels.") He has better luck at the Flaming Cliffs, the famous site in Mongolia's Gobi Desert where the first nest of dinosaur eggs and the first velociraptors were discovered earlier in the twentieth century, before the Cold War closed the route to Western scientists. At a nearby site, Ukhaa Tolgod, Novacek discovers the first fossil ever found of a nesting dinosaur—an oviraptorid crouching, ostrich-like, over the purplish remains of her oblong eggs. Novacek skims over these landmark discoveries with frustrating speed; readers seeking a fuller discussion should return to *Dinosaurs of the Flaming Cliffs*.

The Cretaceous beasts Novacek discovers in the Gobi lived in watery oases in the harsh desert, where they were most likely wiped out by sudden deluges. "The harsh oscillations of drought and flood," he writes, "are a reenactment of the timeless tension between survival and catastrophe that is integral to the evolutionary history of life on earth." Hovering over his survey of his adventures in Boneyard Earth and its series of mass extinctions is the specter of our own disappearance. Novacek has written and lectured extensively on Earth's rapid loss of biodiversity, which he joins other scientists in calling "the sixth mass extinction." His book is an elegant plea that paleontology—"the science of a dead planet"—not be the only science to survive into the future.

WASHINGTON IRVING'S LIFE OF MOHAMMED

A vivid account of the origins of Islam, the lifework of the prophet Mohammed in implanting the foundations of that faith, and his avowed debts to Judaism and Christianity. Carefully researched and written by the "grandfather of American literature" during his years as a diplomat in Spain. Introduction by **Raphael Patai,** the noted cultural anthropologist and author of *The Seed of Abraham, The Arab Mind,* and *Society, Culture and Change in the Middle East.* With Irving's appendix on the faith of Islam and its religious practices, his scholarly chapter end-notes, and a useful modern list of transliteration equivalents.

ISBN 0-938864-12-2 • 288 pages

Order from amazon.com, or direct from

THE IPSWICH PRESS

Box 291, Ipswich, MA 01938

Paper, $11.95, S&H $2.95. Check/MC/Visa

FOR THE FIRST TIME, PERHAPS, A TENABLE HISTORY OF JESUS

It won't be found in the Bible. As borne out by critical analysis, the New Testament Gospels are sloppy history, giving a picture of Jesus more imaginative than factual. Frankly, most Christians seem not to care--transcendentalism spins its own reality. But true realists, for whom accurate history matters, may be pleased with what the recently discovered *Gospel of Thomas* provides. It consists of 113 notes taken down by a disciple of things he heard Jesus say that perplexed him. Thus the notes probably have not suffered alteration and were written down at the time heard--the best kind of source for a history.

Jack Hannah in ***You Will Not Taste Death: Jesus and Epicureanism*** recognizes the notes as chronologically ordered and correlative with the skeletal history used in the *Gospel of Mark*. He provides all the text of *Thomas* with comments and Marcan context, thereby retrieving a narrative of Jesus that is tenably historical.

This ***historical*** Jesus based his teaching on the Epicurean philosophy, not on Judaism with its fasting, praying, almsgiving, and obeying food laws. This ***historical*** Jesus said, "Tell no lie and never do what you hate." This ***historical*** Jesus never mentioned a devil, demons, or hell. Epicureanism also shaped Jesus' thought that God and Caesar are man-made authorities and that one's ultimate authority should be oneself.

Hannah's book is 321 pgs., pbk., $12 postpaid. Please order by check or money order from:

Frank Publishing, 1816 Springmill Road
Mansfield, OH 44903-8907

http://bookwire.bowker.com/bookinfo/title.aspx?20690

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Persian Pleasure Trip

SEARCHING FOR HASSAN:
AN AMERICAN FAMILY'S
JOURNEY HOME TO IRAN
By Terence Ward. Houghton Mifflin. $25.

Reviewed by TARA BAHRAMPOUR

If Iranian society is a carefully designed, meticulously tended garden, then most of the Americans who lived in Iran before the Islamic revolution can best be described as golden retrievers bounding around with Frisbees. The thousands of American oilmen, military personnel, and equipment suppliers who streamed into Iran under the shah were largely insular; ensconced in their own apartment complexes, swimming clubs, schools, and restaurants, they barely noticed the Iranians, let alone tried to understand them. They wandered into mosques in shorts, stumbled out of bars on religious mourning days, and blasted rock music in public parks, gradually helping to sow the anti-U.S. sentiment that exploded in 1979.

Not everyone was so feckless, however. There were Americans who tried, with varying degrees of success, to understand their host country. They didn't live like regular Iranians, but rather found that their foreignness gave them entry into an elite consisting of Westerners and Western-educated Iranians. No matter how unremarkable their origins, Americans in Iran had automatic access to this privileged class, and many joined it, living in nineteenth-century villas, employing cooks and maids and chauffeurs, attending parties with royal ministers. As one former expat put it, "You gave them status because you were foreign, and they gave you status because they were the shah's government or Qajar princes."

By the late 1970s, the Americans' sheer numbers would diminish their exoticism, and the relationship between the two countries would become more complicated. But in 1960, when Terence Ward's family moved to Tehran, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism was years away, and the shah's repression was largely hidden from foreigners. Vietnam had not yet replaced World War II as the dominant metaphor for U.S. involvement abroad, and Americans were still seen as helpers rather than meddlers.

Ward's father, a World War II bombardier with leftist politics, had a job advising Iran's national oil company. Once there, Ward's parents chose the cosmopolitan version of expat life over the isolationist brand. They lunched not at the American Club but at the French Club, "far from the brash Yanks"; they sent their four sons to a polyglot international school rather than to "the overcoached, overtestosteroned, overserious American School." And they grew close to the Iranian family members who were their servants—especially the husband, Hassan, who became a second father to the boys, a source of folk wisdom and stories that linked them to the Iran beyond their garden walls. Returning to the States after nine years, the Wards lost track of Hassan's family but never stopped wondering about their fate. In 1998 they returned to Iran to look for Hassan and to tour the country. Their journey, and Ward's childhood memories, form the basis of *Searching for Hassan,* a book that offers glimpses of expatriate life in Iran but stops short of truly exploring the effects that life had on those who lived—and left—it.

In the last decade, Iran's Islamic regime has softened enough to attract a trickle of foreign writers. Their accounts tend to be informed by certain discoveries: that Iranians are incredibly hospitable; that Iranian women are feisty and independent; that despite what the government says, plenty of Iranians watch American television and admire the United States. Picking up Ward's book, I had hopes that he would take this further. I was interested in hearing from an American who approached Iran with a visceral familiarity, a writer who, in preparing to travel there, would have read what others had written and would offer insights that penetrated beyond theirs. In a

Tara Bahrampour, a reporter for *The New York Times,* is the author of *To See and See Again,* a memoir of life in Iran.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

country that has inspired paralyzing longing in its own exiled citizens, I wondered what return would mean to Americans who had spent so much time there, and how their experience would enrich Ward's narrative.

There are moments when it does—usually when Ward describes the past. He lovingly recalls his multicultural school, where he proposed marriage to an Iranian Jewish classmate and longed for a bright-colored turban like the one his Sikh friend would one day wear. And his accounts of Hassan's boyhood, when mud walls guarded the villagers against Qashqai marauders, provide the kind of personal detail he is uniquely situated to offer.

But too often Ward treads territory already explored by other writers, and frequently he even allows them to speak for him. Much of the book is composed of lengthy explanations of historical and political facts that, while interesting, have been well documented by authors who were not also trying to write about their own lives. He cites so many sources that the book begins to sound like a college paper, and the narrative takes on a generic cast as the voices of Sandra Mackey, Robert Byron, and V. S. Naipaul substitute for Ward's own observations. Ward cannot seem to decide whether he is writing a history, a memoir, or a travelogue, and as a result, the book never solidifies into any of those three forms.

If it is a memoir, I would have liked to know what Ward's father, a onetime union organizer, thought of the "lavish black-tie affairs" he hosted in Tehran, parties at which "Iranian aristocrats and pipe-smoking professors, Western diplomats, covetous businessmen with their trophy wives, and thinly disguised spies . . . gossip and guzzle Russian vodka." Did his parents feel out of place? Did they prefer this life to the one they'd come from? If so, why did they leave Iran? (Ward's explanation—that they sent their oldest son to a U.S. boarding school, then joined him in the United States when he didn't like it—feels incomplete.)

While they lived in Iran, America was an abstraction to the Ward children. "We had heard only faint rumors about a giant called Willie Mays and the mythical Central Park. We were oblivious of distant America. For us children,

INCHARDI

Recent novels by J. Inchardi

($20.00 each)

I REACH OVER NOW
(a Parisian novel)

MORNING IN SNUG HARBOR
(a nautical novel)

A ROSE COLORED BOAT
(an autobiographical novel)

US
(a futuristic novel)

ATLANTIS
(an academic novel)

QUEEN B
(a political novel)

URIAH
(a biblical novel)

Order by mail from
Sirius Books
P.O. Box 177
Freeport, Maine 04032

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Iran, not the United States, was home." Leaving the only world they knew, they would have entered a strange realm of expatriated expatriates. Yet Ward never describes how his family reacted to living in a place that was officially home, yet vastly different from the home they knew, nor does he mention what they did in the United States. We are told that he enrolled in his university's Near East department and later studied in Egypt; according to the book jacket, he has worked as "a cross-cultural consultant who has advised corporations and governments in the Islamic world," but he never says where he worked, what he did, or how any of it related—or did not relate—to his childhood. His only clear attachment to Iran is his desire to find Hassan.

The whole family shares that desire, and it propels their journey. Like other recent travelers, they find that Iran is more open than they expected. Cab drivers brazenly criticize the government. A young man wears ripped Levi's and Air Jordans. Teenage girls photograph each other in front of the ancient rock carvings at Persepolis. By now, anyone who has followed Westerners' reports from Iran, as Ward must have, should not be terribly surprised to see these things. But Ward's wide-eyed reactions—"Wasn't taking pictures of these ancestors *haram,* forbidden?" or "It was all a bit confusing. I had expected a much firmer Islamic clampdown on the MTV global culture"—seem naïve.

So does the fear that permeates the journey. Ward is careful to differentiate between his family and most Americans, who view Islamic Iran as a frightening place and who, as his mother explains to their guide with a sigh, "don't know any better" than to lump Iranians with Arabs. And yet, for people who know better, the Wards are oddly skittish throughout their journey. When they finally reach Hassan's village and Ward's mother shows someone their old friend's photo, Ward's brother Chris gripes, "Great, now she's talking to Brutus, village chief of Hezbollah . . . We'll never get out of here." It is unclear what they think will happen to them. Iran has a spotty record of arrests of its own citizens, particularly reformist politicians and intellectuals, but Ward cites no evidence of American travelers getting into trouble, and they are doing nothing illegal by looking for their old friend. Nor are they the only Americans there; at the time of their visit, busfuls of American retirees were stopping at many of the same sites.

In the end, the family's experiences tend more toward entertainment than adventure, and their impressions coalesce around the delightful and resilient nature of Iranians. On his last night there, Ward concludes that "these people, so long cut off from the world, possessed such acute insights. They offered their humor in healthy doses and a profound friendship that will conquer any who encounter it." Such statements smack of the superficiality Ward criticizes in other Americans.

Ward's family members come across as goodhearted, and I suspect they are more complex than he draws them. In the book, his brother Rich is the brave one, Chris the frightened one; the father is strong willed and game, the mother saintly. They stick to these roles, and their staccato exclamations over their adventures do little to illuminate them. Ward's portrayal of Hassan is similarly one-dimensional. When they find him, he is gray and stooped, but still the same old Hassan, taking the boys on a bazaar jaunt, dispensing bargaining tips, and telling folk stories. The reunion with their old friend is clearly gratifying, but it deserves deeper attention. After so many years, was finding Hassan all they hoped it would be? Was it at all disappointing? Did it cast new light on the old days?

Generally, one of the most meaningful elements of a journey back to the locus of one's youth is the reconciliation, sometimes difficult, of memory with reality. "To some extent, one has to rewrite the past in order to understand it," observed Eva Hoffman in her own story of return, *Lost in Translation.* But Ward's return, like his memories, is all sweetness and light. "I love it here. It's like Ali Baba's cave," says brother Kevin in a typical bit of dialogue—and he's right. Reunited with Hassan, Ward has gone back to a place where childlike reactions substitute for thoughtful examination. His story remains a fairy tale rather than the journey of rediscovery it could have been.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE READER REPLIES

9.11.01

As it must be with a national tragedy such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, almost everyone is touched. Probably no Americans closed their eyes on the evening of that dark Tuesday without feeling the heavy weight of death, destruction, and fear on their hearts. And so it must be that almost everyone also has a story. You are to be commended for the stories you presented in the Winter issue of THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR. As always, they were beautifully written, deeply thought, and lasting in their impression. However, as a lifelong native of Washington, D.C., I wondered, where were the stories of my people?

What about those of us who live within blocks of the Pentagon, who saw the early news shots, when reporters near the White House thought that the smoke was from fires on the Mall, when we knew, seeing those pictures, that it wasn't the Mall at all, that it had to be the airport or, worse, the Pentagon itself? What about those—like my friend, since called to active duty—who lost more than half of their unit's colleagues when the plane struck? Or what about those, like my husband, out with our two-year-old daughter at the grocery store, who crested the hill on Columbia Pike (the road above which the plane flew on its approach to the building), only to see an orange fireball and billowing black smoke coming from the fortress of our nation?

We who saw the smoke, we who smelled the acrid air for weeks afterward, we who drove by the building almost every day and felt the pain of a sucker punch to see the massive hole, black and smoldering, covered only slightly with an enormous bright new flag. We who lived in preternatural silence not just for days, but for *three weeks,* while National Airport remained closed. We who heard the fighter jets and military helicopters, not just for one day when the President happened to visit, but every day, day after day and night after night, as the big bombers made their way across the night sky to Afghanistan. We who wondered, that terrible day, what would be next, knowing that the terrorists had destroyed the symbol of our capitalism, and waiting for them to tear out the heart of our democracy.

Our stories, our town, our heroes, and our pain may be overshadowed by the magnitude of the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, but they should not be forgotten. Our wounded are still in hospitals, our city is still recovering, and we know, as we must, that the terrorists have unfinished business here. We know that only the unbelievable courage and heroism of the passengers on the fourth plane prevented the last attack, so we wait and wonder what is next.

ANNE MATHIAS
Washington, D.C.

A PIECE OF COTTON

"Philonoë" states in "A Piece of Cotton" that the flag in her front yard, which she and her family flew for the first time after the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., "meant *We are sad. And we're sorry we've never done this before.*" I can understand the feelings of sadness, and I share them. However, I am mystified as to why intelligent people have been swept up in this jingoistic

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

display as a reaction to those events. Who would not be sad at the loss of life that occurred on September 11 and at the implications that attack had for the state of the human race and the place of the United States in the world? Flag-waving does not address those issues and in fact provides support to those who want to declare war on Iraq (now that we've "taught Afghanistan a lesson"); to those who pass laws encroaching on our civil liberties in the name of fighting terrorism; and to those who want to spend billions of our tax dollars on a missile defense system that will primarily line the pockets of the military-industrial-complex fat cats, all of whom, I am sure, wear flag pins in their lapels.

The Bush administration is using the terrorist attacks to further its right-wing agenda and retain power in Washington. Flying the flag signals to them that they have support to proceed. We need instead to find ways to express our dismay and disgust at the tactics of terrorists without supporting policies that will only ensure the continuation of wars and of reprisals against the United States. Demanding that the Bush administration become a responsible member of the world community, including actively working to settle the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, would be a start. Perhaps we should all fly the flags of Israel and Palestine.

MARJORIE M. VAN OCHTEN
Lansing, Michigan

GODLY RELIGIONS

Now that we know from Professor Ali S. Asani ("Pluralism, Intolerance, and the Qur'an") that Islam tolerates worshipers of other gods, where do we atheists and other infidels go for asylum? To Jonathan Rosen's religion ("Grace, Punishment, and the Torah"), whose God himself has to pray for mercy? Your deference to godly religions is starting to raise questions about THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR. By contrast, Christopher Clausen's carefully reasoned and beautifully written "Childfree in Toyland" reminds one disappointed reader that when you're not trying so hard to be correct, when you're simply good, you're very, very good.

AARON ALEXANDER
New York City

Editor's note: Mr. Alexander might wish to read Arthur Krystal's "Why Smart People Believe in God" (Autumn 2001), a reasoned defense of agnosticism.

LEAP

I initially put off reading the Winter issue of the SCHOLAR for a few days—I tend to pace myself on September 11 writings. Like all New Yorkers, I go through weeks when I want to read essays, poetry, or ruminations, and feel a need to talk, while there are other weeks when I cannot read anything and simply carry my own thoughts about with me. But when I read Brian Doyle's "Leap," it was as though I hadn't read anything at all before: it moved me and resonated with me in a way that virtually no other piece of writing on September 11 has done. It said everything that I had been waiting for someone to say; it reflected all the grief and horror and courage. It is a beautiful and perfect essay, and I thank you with all my heart for it.

As the author himself notes, the piece is prayerlike. Many of us went to services throughout the fall, and "Leap" is the kind of homily we needed so much to hear. I always enjoy the arrival of the SCHOLAR, but it rarely makes me cathartically weep.

MICHELE RUBIN
New York City

SOLECISM

As a careful reader of the SCHOLAR, I could not help noticing a surprising grammatical lapse that made me wonder whether the copy editor had been nodding when the article in question was before her/him.

In "The Nomads of Language," Ariel Dorfman writes: "there will still be a valley of misunderstandings between she who arrives and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he who greets her, he who arrives and she who sells him bread." The entire complex sentence is awkward to begin with; however, prepositions (and direct verbs) are never followed by a personal pronoun in the nominative case. The trap was probably laid by the respective relative clauses following the personal pronouns ("who arrives . . . who greets") and by the twin formula of two personal pronouns, and that twice over. But it becomes quite clear that the basic sentence consists only of "there will be . . . misunderstandings between she . . . and he . . . , he . . . and she. . . ."

As a foreign-born and foreign-educated linguist, I have observed this absurdity for many years, even among academically educated Americans. Dorfman himself does not apply the same incorrect use of the nominative when it is a case of one pronoun only, viz., "temptations that call to us" (page 90). To be consistent, he would have had to say: "temptations that call to we."

HEDWIG T. DURNBAUGH
Huntingdon, Pennsylvania

Editor's note: Several editors read "The Nomads of Language" prior to publication. All, it appears, were nodding.

MECHANIC

One reference that John Lukacs overlooked in his nicely turned essay on the meanings of *mechanic* is to the 1972 film *The Mechanic*, starring Jan-Michael Vincent and Charles Bronson. The latter plays a ruthlessly efficient professional killer—a "mechanic" showing his younger protégé the ropes. That use of the label picks up on the more common sporting usage, where a competitor considered automatic but bloodless (the snooker player Stephen Hendry, say) is called a mechanic. I suppose the culmination here would be Arnold Schwarzenegger's famous portrayal of the Terminator, an assassin so perfectly tuned and emotionless that he is, in fact, a machine.

MARK KINGWELL
Toronto

CHILDFREE IN TOYLAND

I appreciated Christopher Clausen's thoughtful essay on the subject of choosing to be childless. A few days before reading it, I was standing in line at the grocery store, observing a father shamelessly ridiculing his young son. The child—maybe three years old—seemed desperate for his father's attention, which he received in the form of insults and slaps to the head. At that moment a familiar thought entered my mind: Why is it that we must pass exams and acquire a license to drive a car, yet any bozo with the proper working machinery can have a child? Professor Clausen uncovers the root of being a good parent—asking yourself why you want to be a parent at all.

AMY STRADA
Pittsburgh

THE DEPTHS OF FEELING

No doubt you've been inundated with e-mails regarding the missing text at the end of Mark Kingwell's review (titled "The Depths of Feeling") of Martha Nussbaum's *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions.* If it's only a case of a chopped-off clause (it looks as if the review had less than a sentence to go), could you mail me the missing text? The suspense is killing me.

BARRY LYONS
New York City

Editor's note: The final paragraph of the review in question should have read: "Is that enough? Fortunately or otherwise, it will have to be." Most *un*fortunately, a printer's error excised the last four words. Our apologies to Professor Kingwell, Mr. Lyons, and other puzzled readers.

Please send letters to THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR, *1785 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Fourth Floor, Washington, D.C. 20036; fax them to 202-265-0083; or e-mail them to* scholar@pbk.org. *Please include a daytime telephone number. Letters may be edited for length or clarity.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Podium

Precocity

SUSAN SONTAG

There is today a great prejudice against precocity. When you read about an infant prodigy, you're happy to learn that he loves the Spice Girls. That makes you feel good. It's not that the prodigy has some *other* interest, but that he has a *low* interest, conforming to the mandates of the culture. That's awful.

When I was growing up, one was more protected. I was born the same year as Sylvia Plath. When Plath was seventeen or eighteen, she entered a contest and became a guest editor of *Mademoiselle* for a month or two. I was asked in an interview by a journalist whether I would have entered that competition. When I was seventeen I had never heard of *Mademoiselle*. Nowadays, it would be unlikely that you wouldn't have heard of that magazine or its equivalent. The hegemony of mass culture is much more intense and pervasive. Mass culture reduces the incentive to precocity.

For the precocious, vocations seem to emerge without encouragement. But it's hard to be a virtuoso pianist at four if you don't have a piano at home. I once asked Jasper Johns when he knew he wanted to be a painter. He'd grown up in a village in South Carolina, with no contact with the arts.

"Six," he said. "When I was six."

"What could you have seen?" I asked. Jasper Johns is a very ironic person. He said, "I must have seen a box of crayons."

Precocity should be encouraged. Slowness should be sympathized with. Life is not a race. People catch fire at different rates. We've learned to be patient with a slower person. We should learn to be patient with people who are quicker.

—from a panel discussion titled "To Be Young and on Fire," at the New York Institute for the Humanities, New York University, February 14, 2002

Susan Sontag is an essayist, novelist, and cultural critic. Her writings include *Against Interpretation and Other Essays; Illness as Metaphor; AIDS and Its Metaphors; On Photography; The Volcano Lover; In America;* and *Where the Stress Falls,* as well as short stories, filmscripts, and a play.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

HARD BREAD

PEG BOYERS

"Boyers has written the poetry of *another person*, an operation requiring the paired gifts of ventriloquist and vampire. The explicit wisdom and the mysterious reticence of 'Natalia Ginzburg' constitutes, for all Peg Boyers' modesty of address, the most original debut in my experience of contemporary American poetry."

—Richard Howard

"Boyers inhabits the soul of Natalia Ginzburg and, in poems of rare power, illuminates the inner lives of Ginzburg's intimates, those who wrote their way through the horrors of fascism, imprisonment and survival...a masterpiece of lyric dramatic art."

—Carolyn Forché

"The creation of the voice in this book—stoic, resigned, insistent on truth—is a brilliant achievement ... Read Peg Boyers' book and you will never forget it."

—Frank Bidart

"This is true poetry, giving voice with unforgettable specificity to the woe, comedy and heroism of a twentieth-century life."

—Robert Pinsky

Paper $14.00

PHOENIX POETS

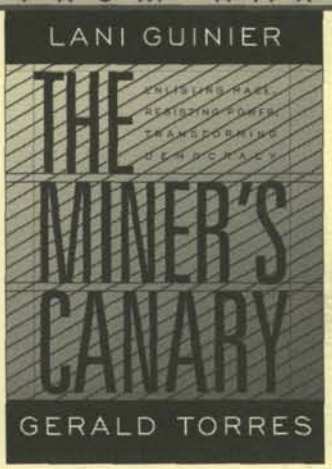
AVAILABLE IN BOOKSTORES.

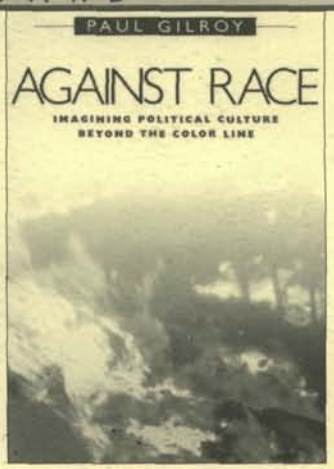
The University of Chicago Press

www.press.uchicago.edu

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEW FROM HARVARD





The Anatomy of Racial Inequality

GLENN C. LOURY

"A fresh, challenging analysis of the racial inequality endured by African-Americans…There's no question that this is a significant, even crucial text gravid with vital ideas."
—KIRKUS REVIEWS

"Coolly, clearly, and relentlessly, Glenn Loury traces the devastating effects of racial stigmatization on relations between blacks and whites in America. He uses the analytic tools of economics deftly without for a moment falling into pomp or mystification. No one has better stated the case against presuming that liberal states and free markets will of themselves dissolve unjust inequalities."
—Charles Tilly, Columbia University

The W. E. B. Du Bois Lectures
$22.95 cloth

The Miner's Canary

Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy

LANI GUINIER AND GERALD TORRES

"In this outstanding, trenchant, and ultimately uplifting book, Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres demonstrate how a racial order still profoundly structures the life chances of all Americans, and convincingly argue that racially based social movements have historically, and can again, promote a truly egalitarian society. *The Miner's Canary* is sure to become required reading for all those who seek to understand the racial divide as well as those who care about the future of the American polity."
—Michael C. Dawson, author of *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics*

The Nathan I. Huggins Lectures
$27.95 cloth

Against Race

Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line

PAUL GILROY

"Paul Gilroy, whose *Black Atlantic* broke through the nation-specific context of race politics, has written a powerful, albeit minoritarian defense of the position that racial thinking—not just racism—is a key obstacle to human freedom…Gilroy's reach is dazzling, his analysis acute and insightful, but in the end he recognizes that, lacking a political constituency for his planetary humanism, his ideas remain not a program but a utopian hope… At the end of the day, *Against Race* remains the brilliant jeremiad of an out-of-step intellectual whose main weapon is criticism. There are few who do it better."
—Stanley Aronowitz, THE NATION

Belknap Press • $16.95 paper

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
phone: 800 448 2242 • www.hup.harvard.edu

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED